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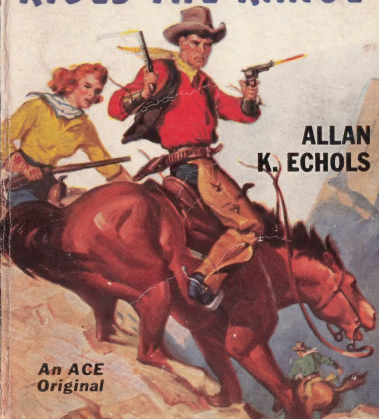
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A "Dead" Man Sparks the Fires
of Rancher Rivalry

TERROR RIDES THE RANGE

**ALLAN
K. ECHOLS**

**An ACE
Original**



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"Before you've seen my burying day, Dallas Morehead, I'm going to show you a few things about the likes of me! I can't burn any deeper in hell for what I'm going to do!"

It was a man who considered himself virtually dead who became the stumbling block to Morehead's plans for taking over the lush Pushmoline Valley. A little nester, whom Morehead's men had thought too unimportant to hang, but whom they had pushed around once too often. And because other cowmen's tempers were already stretched to the breaking point, the turning of that insignificant worm touched off an explosion of range bloodshed and violence.

TERROR RIDES THE RANGE is an ACE Original, a new yarn by Allan K. Echols, the author of *The Renegade Hills* and many other Western best-sellers.

Turn this book over for the second complete Ace Western novel.

ALLAN K. ECHOLS says of himself:

"I was born on the Texas side of the Red River separating Texas from the Indian Territory which is now the State of Oklahoma. My father was a doctor, much of whose business was patching up broken bones and plugging gunshot wounds incurred by ranchers and trail drivers.

"I grew up to work as a newspaperman and as motion picture and radio writer, edited Western magazines, and then settled down to free-lance writing in New York.

"About ten years ago I went back to Oklahoma. Here men still settle their arguments with guns and prefer a horse to a car, and the wolves and coyotes are still chased down the street on dark nights. It is of this country that I have written some sixteen hundred short stories and articles, and twenty-odd books."

***Terror Rides
the Range***

BY ALLAN K. ECHOLS

ACE BOOKS, INC.

23 West 47th Street, New York 36, N. Y.

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CHAPTER 1

NOW THE GRASS in the valley of the Pushmoline River was a midsummer tan, but there was a wealth of it, enough to feed all the stock from the foot of the mountains to town, and from the edge of the nester settlement clear to the back of Dallas Morehead's range. It was rich, and up to the knees of the bay stallion that Jim Weldon rode.

Protected from the worst of the winter winds by the crags of the Pushmoline Mountains fencing it in from the north, catching its water from the rains trapped by the peaks, this had been a good place for a man to live and work. Men had come here and had built their herds and prospered, and had lived among their neighbors in peace and plenty.

No man had owned a foot of the rich ground on which his home was built nor on which his cattle grazed along with those of his neighbors, and there had been little trouble between neighbors as they worked together and built their security with their own hearts and their hands. The land belonged to the Government, and a man could pick himself out a spot and build his home on it, and no man had the right to tell him to move.

It was the look of this good land that Weldon saw as he stopped to water his horse before crossing the Pushmoline River at the ford below "Duke" Forrest's horse ranch, but it was the effect of the impending change that gripped him in a kind of tight pain in the chest. Word had been out for some months now that the Government was going to sell this land, to put it up for auction to the highest bidder.

And as the word of the impending sale had got around, there had come an undertone of restlessness, of worry and suspicion, a sense of insecurity which had fastened upon the settlers here. It had made their mouths tight around the corners; it had made them wary of talking too freely about their plans, and it had given them pause to contemplate the possible actions of their neighbors. It was a threat to their

homes, to their security. It was even a threat to their very lives. Men had died for land in these parts.

The trouble had already started, and out of it there had emerged a shadowy form of the things to come, the alignments, the vague shapes of the troubles which were to descend upon them. No man doubted that the clouds of war hung dark and heavy over the Pushmoline.

It was near dusk on this Saturday evening when Weldon rode into the town of Big Shady, and it was a relief to escape from the heat. The sprawling cowtown nestled at the base of Big Shady, a single mountain which had got lost from its brothers ten miles distant, and from which it took its name and derived some coolness for a greater part of the day than the surrounding country. It had been deliberately built in this spot because the sun disappeared behind the peak four hours before it set on the horizon, and brought its welcome relief at a time when it would do the most good.

Big Shady had been an isolated and a friendly place, but as Weldon turned into its lone main street lined with pine buildings, he felt the change in its mood. There were horses at the hitchrack, and there were men, families and Saturday nighters, loitering and squatting on their boot-heels in the coolness of the sundown. They returned the greeting signals which Weldon waved to them—and he read in their postures and their faces the same tenseness that he felt. Big Shady was an uneasy town in the dusk of this Saturday evening.

Weldon pulled his horse up to the water-trough in the middle of the street in front of the Shady Rest Saloon and let the animal nose into the water, pulling him back before he drank too much, and tying him to the rack in front of the saloon.

He stepped up on to the boardwalk and stopped there while his hands fished for the makings of a cigarette and his eyes roved the street, reading signs as a lifetime in this country had taught him to do.

He measured the town, the feeling of it, the mood it was in. His glance ran down the walk past the Shady Rest Saloon,

a couple of stores, the post office, the hotel with the stage station next door. Across the street at the far end, the adobe jail squatted grey and drab. A couple of men lounged under a juniper tree near its door. Waiting. Like vultures.

His glance, coming back along the street, picked up a squatter loading his wife and children into a wagon with its scant load of flour and groceries. There were other wagons pulling out, gaps where wagons had been at the hitchracks. And over it all a kind of nervous inaction, a kind of waiting. There were those who wanted to get away, those who would stay.

Weldon saw these things because he was looking for them, trying to read what lay behind this tense stillness. Still short of thirty, he had been in this country ten years, and the valley had taught him the value of keeping his mouth closed and his eyes open.

He was a tall man with broad shoulders and a rider's leanness through the hips. He had a square jaw and a seriousness around the eyes and mouth that made his occasional easy smile come somewhat as a surprise—when it came at all.

Friendships ran deep here, and enmity ran strong, and those who were his friends had a feeling of security in the knowledge that he was not the kind of man to either give or withdraw his friendship easily. And those who had reason to hate him saw danger lurking behind the aloof grey eyes which seemed to see everything and reveal nothing. He had killed a man once, a man who thought he couldn't be killed by an ordinary rancher. He was not a man who could be walked on, and there were those who hated him for that.

Weldon saw Dallas Morehead and Coke Duffy, Morehead's foreman, standing on the porch of the hotel and talking in what appeared to be an idle manner. The hotel porch gave a straight view of the jail directly across the street, and Weldon knew that their conversation was not idle. Two more of Morehead's Circle M men lounged down the street on the other side of the jail, and another pair of them were

sitting on the porch of Mallin's store on this side of the jail.

That made six Circle M men cutting off the street, two one way, two the other, and Morehead himself and his foreman across the street from the jail.

Weldon's face broke into a dry smile that tightened the corners of his mouth. He threw his cigarette down in the dust, eased up his gun belt and walked down toward the hotel, stepping quietly up on to the porch.

Coke Duffy was an over-sized ox with yellow hair, all bone and muscle, and his face was square and red, the kind that never tanned. His green eyes caught up Weldon and flashed their long-held dislike. Weldon paid no attention to him but stopped in front of Dallas Morehead.

Morehead was of medium size, and he wore the clothes of a successful ranch manager rather than those of a working cowman; tailored tan breeches stuffed into the tops of hand-stitched boots, hand-made gabardine shirt and a fawn Stetson which probably had cost him a hundred dollars. His gun was silver-plated and pearl-handled. His face was pink-shaven and a small black moustache, neatly trimmed, gave him a sophisticated air. His shrewd black eyes had a predatory boldness as he searched for the meaning in Weldon's approach without giving any sign of his thoughts.

He nodded his head with a quick jerk and said, "Howdy, Weldon."

Weldon answered easily, "I thought I ought to tell you. I'm in town to bail Heddon out of jail. I'm doing it so he can go back to his family."

Duffy said sharply, "You *are* not. We've took too long to catch that damned thief with his pants down to let him out now."

Morehead said, "Shut up, Duffy. Weldon, you've got the wrong idea. That nester was on my property, we caught him with a calf he'd butchered with our brand on it, and he hadn't even had time to skin it and hide the skin. You turn a man

like that loose, and he'll be right back doing the same thing the next time he runs out of meat."

"Yes," Weldon answered. "I know it. Some of those nesters are worthless and some of them are just poor and trying to get a start. That's not the idea. He's got a wife and kid. What about them?"

"Can I raise veal to feed every worthless nester family that settles on my range?" Morehead answered. "Weldon, you're raising beef just like I am. Those people are taking this range, and it's got to be stopped while we've got a cow left."

"If you can persuade them to get out," Weldon answered, "that's one thing. But railroading them out is another."

Morehead's dark brows dropped slightly. "Railroading?" he repeated softly.

"Yes! It won't be long now before the land auction. Some of these little boys will be able to buy their homes. You want to drive them out before the sale date."

Morehead snapped. "You're saying that I'm trying to steal their roofs out from over their heads. I don't care much for that kind of talk."

"You may not like it, but you're going to hear it. You've already planted the seed of your idea. You've already made the talk that a jury will turn that nester loose, that a big rancher couldn't get protection for his cattle from a jury with poor people on it. So, you argue that you've got to protect yourself. And with that excuse, you intend to drive away or kill everybody that's on land you want to buy. That's no good, Morehead. It's not right."

Morehead smiled coldly. "You're playing fortune teller; reading my mind?"

"Maybe! So, I'll read the future to you. I'm going Heddon's bail, and I'm taking him back to his family. I'm making myself responsible for his safety, and if anything happens to him while I'm getting him out of town, I will hold you personally responsible."

Morehead cocked his neck upward so that he was looking slightly downward over the hump on his nose, searching Wel-

don speculatively for a sign of weakness. He did not see any, and he gave his mind to the best way to handle this affair.

"I'll have to settle this matter with you," he said. "But not right now. I've got other things to do first."

"Then I'll be waiting for you," Weldon answered. "And in the meantime—I'm taking Heddon out of town."

"Just why do you keep telling me that you're protecting that nester?"

"I told you why; it's because you're here to see that nobody bails him out, or to kill him if he is turned out. I thought you'd like to know that, to do that, you'll have to start with me."

Weldon turned his back to Morehead and walked through the dust to the jail across the street. At the entrance to the jail, he turned and his glance swept the street again.

Weldon saw Ed Hay, his foreman, come out through the swing doors of the Shady Rest, followed by Happy Durham and "Duke" Forrest, the horse rancher. All friends.

He saw Morehead walking rapidly down the street toward the two men stationed down there, while Coke Duffy was crossing the street toward the two men lounging in the shade of the store. Morehead was changing his tactics someway.

Weldon turned and went on into the jail office, finding Marshal Bradford putting on his green-faded derby to go out and cruise the street. Bradford was a blocky man with a square head of short-clipped white hair and granite grey eyes which revealed nothing but a reserve toward those who had seen him every day for ten years. Nobody knew him; nobody knew what he thought. Nobody had ever heard him raise his voice, and nobody had ever seen him fail to do any job he set out to do.

Those expressionless eyes came up and drilled into Weldon as he said, "Howdy, Jim."

"I want to put up bail for Heddon," Weldon said. "Five hundred dollars, isn't it?"

Bradford knew, as everybody on the Pushmoline would know, that this act of Weldon's was a declaration of war

on the man who had caught Heddon stealing his cattle, and yet Bradford got out the bail bond and filled it out with no more expression than if he had been issuing a vaccination certificate for a herd of cattle.

Weldon counted the money out on the desk in bills, and Bradford stuffed them into his wallet.

"His trial is set for the eighteenth, and it's your duty to see that he is here on that date," the marshal said.

"I know," Weldon answered.

He suspected that Bradford was thinking the same thing that he was. Heddon would be lucky to live until the day of his trial.

CHAPTER 2

MARSHAL BRADFORD threw open the cell door and Weldon looked at old Rank Heddon who sat on a cot, his head in his hands.

The man's scalp was pink and brown, and covered with a thin dishevelled mass of iron grey hair. He glanced up at Weldon, and there was the look of a trapped animal in his gaunt and weak face. Rank Heddon was facing the end of his sorry trail with terror and despair.

"What do you want?" His voice was a blend of suspicion and fear, for the shadow of the noose hung over him, and he knew beyond question that he was a dead man.

"I've just signed your bail," Weldon answered. "Get out of here and go home to your wife and kids."

A series of emotions crossed the man's face in quick parade, hope, eagerness, suspicion again, and then resignation.

"You can't do this to me," he whined. "You want to get me out of here and kill me."

"Why would I want to do that?" Weldon answered.

"You're just like the rest of them, Morehead and all. You want me out of the way, and you're going to make sure you get me out of the way."

"What makes you say Morehead wants you out of the way?" Weldon asked.

Bradford, standing behind Weldon, rubbed his chin thoughtfully and kept quiet.

"Don't I know? Didn't he offer me fifty dollars to move out of the valley? And when I wouldn't do it, he framed me."

Weldon turned to Bradford. "Tell him that I'm not leading him to a tree, Mr. Bradford."

Bradford spoke in his soft distant voice. "Get out, Heddon. Weldon made bail for you, and he's not the man to trick you. You're free, and he'll see that you get out of town if he says he will."

Heddon finally half-believed that he was free, and he picked up his nondescript hat and jammed it on his head. But Weldon saw that the man was merely convinced that the marshal was driving him into the hands of the enemy. He walked toward the front door on unsteady legs.

Heddon stood outside the jail with Weldon beside him, and he looked fearfully this way and that, his red-rimmed eyes searching for the enemy. They came to rest on Coke Duffy, who sat on a chair which leaned back against the wall of the hotel. Duffy was watching the jail entrance, and his eyes never left the prisoner and Weldon.

"Uh—" Heddon's voice did not quite make the word he wanted to say.

"Never mind Duffy," Weldon said. "I'll handle him. Where's your horse?"

"I haven't got one in town," Heddon answered. "I'd have to walk all the way home, and they'd—"

"Come on down to the livery stable," Weldon said, and started out with the man at his side.

Weldon watched Heddon's face as they walked, watched his eyes darting here and there as he stumbled along, and Weldon had both contempt and pity for him.

Heddon was a misfit, a weakling who was facing death, and his mind was wrestling with it, with the possibility of

escape. He was feeling the claw of bullets in him, feeling the rasping choke of the hangrope, and yet trying desperately to build up hope of living to continue his worthless life.

"How come you are doing this for me?" Heddon asked without taking his roaming eyes off the dark points of the street. "You ain't been no friend of mine."

"No, I haven't," Weldon admitted. "It's a matter of principle, Heddon. You happen to represent a principle."

Somehow Heddon got the idea that he was being made a pawn in a game bigger than himself. Perhaps under such circumstances there would be bigger men fighting his battle for him, and maybe they would have to keep him alive. He grasped eagerly at the straw his own mind had created.

"Then you won't want to see me killed for something I didn't do," he said eagerly.

"That's not the point," Weldon answered. "There are things you don't know."

"But I know I didn't steal that veal."

"I wouldn't know about that," Weldon answered. He felt his impatience growing with this man he was protecting. "That's not my affair. I'm seeing you out of town safely; what happens to you after that is up to you. That's all the chance a man ought to want."

His tenuous hope crashed down to earth again inside the little thief, and he slumped along beside Weldon as they turned into the stable.

Weldon got the man a horse from Barney the liveryman, and they came out leading the saddled animal down the street toward where Weldon's horse was hitched. Weldon walked alertly down the street, and he knew that the town was frozen into an expectant stillness.

Duffy still sat idling in the chair on the hotel porch as they passed, his eyes on this strangely assorted pair, his face without expression.

Then Weldon saw something else. Ed Hay lounged across the street from the rack where Weldon's horse was tied, covering Weldon. Weldon had not asked him to do this.

Mack Rennison was leaning against the post of the awning in the shadows of the saddle shop, and the fire of his cigar made a red star in the new darkness, a star that moved up and down like a signal as he moved it from his mouth and replaced it with methodical regularity.

Brandlies' and Turley's two horses were gone from the rail beside Weldon's. Nester wagons had got out of town; nobody moved on the street; men lounged—and waited.

Dallas Morehead was gone; all of his men were out of sight except Duffy, who sat like a buzzard waiting for a calf to die.

Weldon untied his reins with easy slowness, and Marshal Bradford came down the sidewalk and tried the locked doors with the casual disinterest of a night watchman. He nodded to Weldon as he passed and said, " 'Night, Jim," and plodded on down the few doors toward the hotel porch, coming to a stop near Duffy, but apparently not seeing him.

Weldon saw this unobtrusive maneuver and the corner of his mouth cracked in a tight little smile. Bradford would have no back-shooting in his town.

Weldon had plenty of cover to the rear. The darkness ahead was another matter.

"Let's ride," he said to Heddon, and mounted his horse.

They cantered out of town, the window lights alternately lighting them and blotting them out in darkness, their horses' hooves thudding softly in the dust of the road. They passed out of the end of the town, and here the trail was in complete blackness along the foot of the high bluff side of the lone mountain. Weldon said nothing, and Heddon rode cringing in his saddle, fearful and puzzled about his part in a game he did not understand.

They reached the end of the mountain's stone wall and, following the trail, turned sharply around it.

The light of the rising moon bathed the shadowy figures of two horsemen blocking the trail.

Heddon made an unintelligible sound in his throat and his body went limp at the sight of the men.

Weldon said, "Pull up, Heddon," and reined his own horse to a stop.

For a moment the only sound was the tinkle of bit chains and the creak of saddle leather.

Then Weldon said, "Get down a minute, Heddon," and dismounted from his own horse.

Heddon's protest was the anguished cry of a man seeing death reaching out for him; it was horror; and it was snarling anger. "You tricked me! You said you was sending me to my family. Bradford said I could trust you. You're just—" He slid off his horse.

"Shut up," Weldon snapped, pulling a bandanna out of his pocket. "You're going to your family. But first, we want to ask you some questions. For once in your life, you're going to have to talk straight."

"I never done you no harm," Heddon whined.

"We won't go into that," Weldon snapped. "You've eaten my beef, but I've never held it against a hungry man for feeding his family the best way he can. The point is, nobody else would either. Not even Morehead. So, that's what you're going to talk about; you're going to tell us why Morehead had you thrown in jail."

"He claims I stole a calf."

"I know about that, but it doesn't add up. If Morehead only wanted to get rid of you for stealing a calf, he'd have shot you on the spot. There's more to it than that, and that's what you're going to tell us about."

"But that's all."

Weldon snapped, "Turn around while I put this blindfold on you. You're going somewhere to think it over, and it might be a little rough if you take too long in making up your mind."

"You're going to take me somewhere and kill me."

Weldon saw that the man's own imagination and fears were working on him, and he did not answer, but let the silence itself do its deadly work. And Heddon broke quickly.

"You all got me in a corner," he whined. "Either way, I'm a goner."

"Then you'd better decide whether to go along with us or with Morehead."

The man's voice turned shrewd. "If I tell you the truth, you will not kill me?"

"If it sounds like the truth," Weldon answered.

"All right. Duffy caught me dressing out a Morehead calf, and he was going to shoot me right there. Then he made me a proposition; they wanted all the other nesters burnt out, and he told me if I'd burn down their places, he wouldn't shoot me. But I wouldn't do business with him. I might be a poor man, and hustle a piece of meat for my kids, but I wouldn't go burning down my neighbors' houses, and I told him so. I've got some principle about me."

"Or else," Weldon said coldly, "you saw right then that he couldn't do anything to you because you now had something on him. And you decided you could bluff your way through and maybe make a good thing out of it."

Heddon became offended. "Well, if you don't believe me—"

"Go on! And so Morehead decided to throw you in jail to think it over, knowing that you couldn't tell Bradford about his proposition without admitting the theft of the beef. He was going to let you sweat it out, but if you got out of jail, then he was going to pick you up and handle you however it suited him. He probably got that warning to you in jail, didn't he?"

"Yes," Heddon admitted.

"Was that all?"

"Well, Duffy said if I played along with them, I could do right well for myself. I'm a poor man, and I never had a chance, so—"

"That's enough," Weldon said. "You can ride on home now. Get that horse back to the livery, and show up your trial date. But if you want to stay healthy, you'd better hit for the mountain."

"You're letting me go?"

"Yes. If we want you, we'll look you up."

The notion that he was free had some difficulty in penetrating Heddon's understanding, and then it burst through to his benumbed mind. He suddenly threw himself across his saddle and yelled at his horse, straightening up and squirming into his seat as the animal broke into a dead run and quickly melted into the darkness.

Brandlies and Turley, Weldon's neighbors, were the two men who had stood by as silent threats during this interchange, and now Brandlies fished a cigar out of his pocket and lighted it.

"Well, you were right in your guess, Jim. Morehead is figuring on sweeping this range clean before the sale. If he ain't stopped, there won't be a one of us left alive to bid on his own home when the sale starts."

"That stinker in fancy pants!" Turley swore. "Less than a week ago he came around to me, friendly as a preacher, wanting to lend me money to buy myself some pedigree bulls to breed my herd up with."

"Sure," Brandlies answered. "Them bulls could be stole from you in one night, and then you'd be so far in hock to Morehead that you'd have to borrow more from him to buy your land with, and he'd have his hooks in you for your whole place before he got through with you. What do you say, Jim?"

Weldon had got on his horse. "He's got his irons hot, all right. And he's not playing for marbles."

The sound of horses coming from the direction of town caught their attention. There was urgency in the hoofbeats.

"Stand fast," Weldon said. "Block the road."

CHAPTER 3

WELDON AND BRANDLIES AND TURLEY filled the road with their three horses, facing the animals toward the approaching riders. Weldon was in the center.

Then suddenly five riders burst out of the shadows of the

mountain as they turned with the trail and came into the growing moonlight. Duffy, on his big black horse, was in the lead.

Duffy saw the three men blocking their path and threw his hand high in a signal, at the same time pulling his horse up to a sliding halt.

"Spread out," he shouted over his shoulder, and his men spread out, drawing abreast of one another. Even in the bad light, Weldon recognized the men who had been hovering around the jail as the dust cloud floated on away from them.

It was evident that Duffy recognized Weldon while he was getting his horse still.

"Where is he?" the Morehead foreman bellowed. "Where've you got him, Weldon?"

"I wouldn't know," Weldon answered. "Any message, in case I see him again?"

"That'll be enough of that," Duffy growled. "You had your fun in town, but Bradford is not here to cover you now. We'll take that man, or you will tell me where he is."

"You see that we haven't got him," Weldon answered easily. "He's on his way up into the mountains, I suppose. I told him to go there."

"That's going against Morehead," Duffy said. "Taking the side of nesters against your own kind. We'll hold that against you. And now get out of the way. We're going to catch that man before he gets to the mountains."

"Now that," Weldon said quietly, "is another matter. I guaranteed him that you boys wouldn't put a bullet in his back before he got clear of you. So you'd better just give up the idea."

Duffy let out a shout of rage. "Move aside!"

"Duffy," Weldon said, "I'm not much for threats, but I'm holding you here until you decide to turn and ride back to town."

"Move aside, damn you!" Duffy's voice went high in the passion of his mounting rage.

"We're not moving a foot. If you don't like it, you can fight your way through us."

"There's only three of them, Duffy," one of the men said.

"Brandlies," Weldon said without turning his head. "You watch that man that spoke. I will take care of Duffy."

His eyes were fastened on Duffy, registering the man's every slightest shift in the saddle, reading the sign on him. Duffy was built like a wrestler, a man almost immune to human pain, and this made him practically secure in his command of other men.

Weldon let these things run through his mind, and he suspected that the very idea that a man would stand up to him would set Duffy back on his haunches, would crack some of his self-assurance. He sat still in his saddle with his two hands on the horn and let the silence build up thick with suspense around them.

The man who had spoken before said impatiently, "What are you waiting for, Duffy? Do we go through them, or don't we?"

"Duffy," Weldon said quietly, "knows that he personally won't live to get through."

There was a long and tense silence after that.

It was a little thing, the way Duffy seemed to shrink slightly in his saddle there in the moonlight, but there was something about his hardly discernible shift in his saddle that told every man the same story; something died in Duffy during that silence. Duffy had looked on a man who was not afraid to shoot him, and the sight had destroyed something in him.

Even his own men knew it. The talker in his crowd said, "Hell!" and that expressed a whole lot.

And then the silence began piling up again while Duffy's mind raced here and there looking for some way to save his face. He hoped for Weldon to say something more, something that would produce an argument. And Weldon left him hanging on the wreckage of his own self-assurance, while the silence piled up about them. Duffy was facing a showdown that he did not like.

"Well," he said when the silence became unbearable, "I'll see what Dallas has to say about it. You're not going to draw me into any of your traps. You've probably got a dozen rifles trained on my boys from right up in them rocks over my head. Otherwise you wouldn't be so cocky. I'll be seeing you later, Weldon."

He turned his horse around sharply. "Let's go get a drink, boys," he said.

His men trailed him back toward town at an angry gallop.

Brandlies relit his dead cigar. "You broke him, Jim. Right in the presence of his men. He'll never forgive you for that if he lives to be a hundred."

Turley made a sound in his throat and discharged a long breath. "You know," he said, "it does something to you to stand and see a man's cowardice right in front of your very eyes. Makes you sick. All he's got left now is just animal meanness. He's doubly dangerous."

"I know," Weldon answered. "Forget it. We'd better get back to town and let the rest of the boys know how things stand."

The three of them rode into town and went into the Shady Rest Saloon, and there they found a buzz of excitement under which there was a strong tension pulsing. A row of small ranchers were lined up at the bar with their heads together in serious conversation. Cards and chips were lying neglected on the poker table where Mack Rennison, Duke Forrest, Ed Hay and Hap Durham sat.

Forrest, the Britisher, who ran a horse and mule ranch, saw Weldon approaching and nodded his head toward a group of three men reading from a piece of tablet paper tacked on the wall. Brandlies and Turley followed Weldon over to the wall, where they read the notice which had built up the tension.

It was signed by Dallas Morehead, and it read:

"I hereby serve notice to all concerned that having occupied and improved all the land bounded on the East by the

Mountain Road, on the North by the foot of the Pushmoline Mountains, on the West by the Badlands and on the South by the road running West out of Big Shady, I hereby lay claim to, and will purchase at the Government sale this fall, the above-described range and all improvements on it.

I hereby order all squatters now located on said land to move themselves and their possessions off the above-described land immediately. Those who refuse to move will be considered trespassers the same as if they invaded my house, and will be treated accordingly.

I also forbid trespassing on my land by other ranchers without my permission. Those having cattle now grazing on my land can cut them out of the gather at the general round-up this fall and return them to their own lands. In the meantime, there will be no gathering of stray cattle on my land without my permission.

There will be no further warning to trespassers!

Dallas Morehead.

Weldon, Brandlies and Turley joined the others at the table. "When did he post that?" Weldon asked.

"About five minutes ago. Dallas didn't do it; he sent a man." It was Rennison who answered. "Reckon he means it?"

"Of course he means it." Weldon then told them what they had learned from the nester Heddon. "The point is, he won't stop with the nesters. He wants to own this valley. He's telling us now we can't ride on his half of it—even before it's his."

"Well," Rennison argued, "we've always allowed it was his."

"There's another way to look at that," Brandlies said. "We've always known that nobody owned any of the land, and so nobody had a right to tell anybody what he could do. So, if a man sat on a piece of land, nobody had a right to tell him not to. Morehead never owned and never improved an inch of that land those squatters settled on. His cows along

with everybody else's happened to have grazed over it. Those squatters have as much right to buy the land they're on as he has—more right, for that matter. They've even got a legal right to buy the land his house and barns are on if they'll pay more for it than he will. Anybody's got a right to buy any land he's willing to outbid somebody else for."

"That's the way I see it, too," Turley agreed. "And Dallas knows that. He just wants the land, and thinks he's big enough to push them off of it and make them afraid to bid on it."

Forrest, whom everybody called "The Duke" because of his British origin, asked a question. "Does anybody have any idea of how much money Dallas might be able to lay his hands on?"

"He's got about four times as many cattle as any of the rest of us," Turley guessed. "And we've all gotten along pretty well. So, he should have four times as much money as any one of us. Why'd you ask?"

"Just a thought," the Englishman said. "If he had the money, and was willing to do it, he could buy my place right out from under me—or yours. I'm sure he wouldn't—"

Brandlies pounded the table with his fist. "The hell he wouldn't! I never thought about that angle."

Turley said, "A lot of my stuff is grazing over his way. He says I can't go and get it till round-up time. Suppose when round-up came I should discover that most of my calf crop had disappeared? What would I use for money to buy my own land around me? How could I keep him from buying my home out from under me? Anything could be happening to my stuff over on the back of his place if I didn't get around to keep an eye on it once in a while."

Brandlies said, "We're all in the same boat. That man could steal our whole calf crop! I'm depending on selling my young stuff to get the money to buy my land. Jim, what about you?"

"Me?" Weldon echoed. "I'm going over on his place and have a look at my stuff tomorrow."

"Right on his land?" Turley asked.

"I thought we just brought up that angle," Weldon said with a slow smile. "It's not his land—yet. And as long as he doesn't own it, I still feel free to ride over it."

A silence descended on the table. Every man around it knew two things; Weldon would ride where he said he would ride, and Morehead would make good his published threat to stop him.

CHAPTER 4

PRESENTLY WELDON DRAINED his glass and made a move to get up.

"Going home?" Ed Hay asked. "Hap's not drunk enough yet."

"No. I'm going down to the Hotel Bar."

The statement brought a sharp interest to the rest of them and they looked at him searchingly. The Hotel Bar, an annex of the hotel, was the drinking place of Morehead and his Circle M boys.

"Haven't you had enough fun for tonight?" Brandlies asked.

"I was wondering whether Morehead posted his notice anywhere else but here. If he didn't, then he meant that notice as a direct challenge to us."

They all got up. Weldon said, "Don't you boys go down there with me. There's no use inviting a brawl."

He turned and went out and down to the Hotel Bar and walked in and up to the bar, where he ordered a whiskey. There were half a dozen men in the place, including Duffy. Weldon turned his back to the bar and was examining the walls for sight of the notice when Duffy came up to him.

"You're in the wrong stall, ain't you, mister?"

"You bought this place?" Weldon asked. He had his eyes on the Duffy men who were shifting their positions. One of the men went over to the window.

"This is our place," Duffy said. "And we like to keep it

nice and clean. We don't care much for trash to accumulate around here."

Weldon saw Duffy's eyes check on his men. Duffy was in front of Weldon now, and one of the men had come up on each side of him. The man at the window could watch the outside and at the same time block the door if Weldon were tempted to run out. Weldon was boxed in pretty, and he saw the contemplation of action in Duffy's eyes.

Weldon suddenly put the palm of his hand against Duffy's chest and gave him a stiff-armed shove. "Get back," he snapped. "Don't try to crowd me."

Duffy went back a couple of awkward steps and caught himself. The pale blue of his eyes had gone ice-hard, and his hand went toward his gun as he stepped forward.

Weldon whipped his whiskey bottle off the bar. He aimed it at Duffy's cheek bone and put all his weight behind the swing. The blow landed with a solid sound. Duffy hinged at the knees and went down in broken glass and liquor and sawdust.

The man at the window yelled a warning and turned. His eyes bulged out when they rested on the fallen Duffy.

Weldon had made one leap, clearing Duffy's body and getting his gun out at the same moment, thus getting the men who had been on either side of him at the bar so that they were both in front of him.

"You're not polite to your company," he said. "But you've told me all I came to find out. Tell Morehead he can have the war he wants."

He backed out the door and found his own bunch at the point of coming in. It was the sight of them coming down the sidewalk that had brought the warning from the watcher.

"It's all over," he said. "They tried to whipsaw me in there, and it was as clear as rainwater that the whole thing had been planned for the first time they met any of us. We might just as well face it; Morehead is after us all."

Brandlies said, "If that's the way it is, I'm going to have

a look at my cattle over his way. I'll go along with you tomorrow."

"Me, too," Turley added.

"Enough of us could drive it back," Mack Rennison added. "But it would sure be begging for gunplay."

"No gunplay—or no home. Which do you want?" Weldon asked him.

Rennison shrugged.

At that moment, Hap Durham came flagging out of a saloon a few doors down, running toward the bunch with a full whiskey bottle in his hand. He was yelling at them as he ran.

"They've got a trap in there," he shouted as he came up panting. "The rest of Circle M is in the back room of that place. I saw 'em, and they saw me. The town is lousy with 'em."

"What does it mean?" Brandlies asked.

"Morehead's reserves. Duffy's bunch must have been about ready to spring something on us when I barged into him. How many men were there, Hap?"

"Must have been a hundred or so."

"A hundred?" Weldon snapped.

"Well, a dozen, anyway."

"How'd you happen to go into there? That's not our place."

"Just stopped off to get a bottle to take along home with me. The Duke gave the bartender a wink or something back at our place, and he wouldn't sell me any more. The Duke is not a good man to go out with on a social affair. He's a kill-joy."

Hap Durham was staggering slightly and trying to get the cork out of the bottle when Weldon suddenly tensed. He was looking at the saloon from which Durham had emerged, and now he saw men pouring out of the place and fanning across the street.

"Hap's right," he said sharply. "Scatter, boys and try to make for the horses."

The Circle M men were blocking the street between them

and their horses, and there was no way to get to them except through the blockade they were forming.

"We'd better go around the other way," Brandlies suggested. "We can go around the stage station, out through the alley and reach the horses from the other end of the block."

"I doubt it," Weldon answered. "Chances are, one of the men from the Hotel Bar went down the alley to the other place to tip those boys off. There'll be more to cut us off at the other end if we start that way."

Weldon had sized it up right, for he had just finished talking when Duffy's men came out of the Hotel Bar and spread out across their end of the street. Now there were Morehead men blocking both ends of the street, and Weldon counted eighteen in the two parties. By breaking his group up into two separate parties, Morehead had managed to get the little ranchers in a pincher.

"Head for the sidewalk," Weldon said. "The saddle shop. Go through it and out the back."

"But it's locked," Hap protested.

"Break in the glass of the door with your pistol butt, and go on out the back way. Come up the alley to the Shady Rest, come out through the saloon and hit for the horses. I'll cover you."

They strung out, Brandlies going first, then Turley and after him Rennison.

At that moment, a shot came from down the street as the enemy saw their intentions. Then a series of shots followed. The bullets whined down the street, kicking up dust.

A bullet hit Hap Durham's quart whiskey bottle and exploded it, leaving only the neck of it in his hand. Hap looked at the neck of the bottle queerly, then cursed and drew his gun. He emptied the weapon waveringly at the line of Circle M men as he cursed them, then ran staggering toward the saddle shop, propelled by Duke Forrest who came along protectively behind him.

"What are you shoving me for?" Hap yelled.

"To keep you from getting killed," the Englishman answered. "Get along, now."

"How come you don't want me killed?" Hap wanted to stop in the shower of bullets and argue the question.

Forrest caught the back of Hap's belt and shoved. Hap had to run or fall. He ran, with Forrest pushing him from the rear.

Ed Hay came along with Weldon, firing up the street while Weldon fired down the street. Weldon saw a man fall, heard him scream, then shot another to his knees, and that man started crawling down the street through the dust on all fours.

As Weldon made his way toward the saddle shop there was a deep sickness inside him. The gunsmoke in his nostrils brought back to him the old scenes of violence he had known, and he saw now that men would never be any different. Greed and bloodshed, the story repeated over and over as men marched across the raw land. The grass would be green in the years to follow, fertilized with the blood and the bones of the men who found it. It made a man sick of his own kind, but men did not change. They would not learn.

Weldon saw some of the Morehead men breaking out of their ranks, rushing for their horses tied and stamping at the racks, mounting and jerking the animals under control of the bit. They were going to close in, ride down the small ranchers. And men at the other end of the street were doing the same, mounting, bearing down on them.

"Durham's in," Ed Hay said. "Let's go."

They went weaving and crouching, fighting their way toward the broken glass entrance of the saddle shop, the riders bearing down on them from both sides now.

And as he crossed the wooden walk, Jim Weldon saw the girl crouched in the inset of the door, a few feet back from the walk itself. She appeared as though she were trying to shrink through the darkened wall. The other men must have passed within arm's length of her without seeing her. The girl stood back motionless as he approached, apparently hoping not to be seen.

Weldon said, "Go on, Ed," and stopped before the girl.

Two of the horsemen from the left were bearing down on him now, shouting, their weapons lifted. The thud of their horses' hooves grew louder, the dust they churned up bit the nostrils, made their forms vague in the night as they came through patches of light cast by lighted store windows.

Weldon took the girl's arm, and his voice was sharp with the edge of his tension.

"Get inside there," he ordered, and pulled her away from the darkened corner.

He felt resistance tighten her momentarily, but she yielded to his insistent pressure and his snapped command, "Hurry!"

The boys ahead of him had broken the glass out of the saddle shop door, and he guided her to it and did not release her arm until she stepped through it and was swallowed up by the darkness within.

And now the two horsemen were within twenty feet of him and bringing their animals to a halt in a cloud of dust, holding their fire until the animals stopped, assuring them a steady aim.

Weldon stepped aside out of the night's feeble light and into the deeper black of the girl's corner. And then at that moment both men on horseback unloosed their fire. The air danced a little, and the bullets whined into the wood of the door and ploughed up splinters which took off on their own whining flight.

And then Weldon, who had waited until he could be certain that these men were shooting to kill, lifted his weapon and shot them both dead.

He paused a moment while he saw one man plunge head first out of his saddle, and the other man bend double over his horn, fail in his efforts to hold on, and then slide out of his seat. The man's foot caught in the stirrup as his panicked animal started out in a run, dragging him head downward through the intermittent light patches, ploughing up the dust of the street.

Then Weldon turned sadly and stepped into the dark saddle

shop and found his friends and the girl in a tight knot in the darkness just inside the back door. They removed the bar from across the door, opened it and went out into the shadows of the alley. They made their way through the darkness of the cluttered alley up to the rear of the Shady Rest. Weldon stopped them here while he went through the saloon and out the front to reconnoiter.

The Morehead men were bunched down past the saddle shop, where he saw Duffy busily giving them orders. Weldon quickly signalled to Brandlies who was inside the Shady Rest, and Brandlies brought the others through the place and to the front door.

"Wait here now until I untie all the horses, then make a break for it." Weldon said.

"What about the girl?" Turley asked. "Who's she?"

"I don't know," Weldon answered. "I just found her hiding there in the doorway. I suppose she lives around here somewhere. Probably just passing and got caught in the trap."

The girl came out of the saloon beside Duke Forrest. She had heard him.

"I live out on the river," she said. "Could I go along with you?"

Weldon gave her a sharper look as he realized she belonged to one of the squatter families. "Haven't you any folks in town?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"All right. Some of us can ride double and give you a horse." He went out to untie the horses, keeping the animals between him and Duffy's army of gunmen.

Hap Durham staggered up, still holding on to the neck of his broken whiskey bottle.

Duke Forrest looked at him and said gravely, "Somebody'll have to hold him in the saddle anyway, to keep him from falling off. Take his horse for the girl and I'll take care of him on mine."

Forrest did not release his grip on Hap's belt, but caught him by the waist and lifted him off his feet, then started

running across the sidewalk toward his horse, carrying him like a bag of feed. He threw Hap into the saddle and mounted behind him while others got the girl on to Hap's horse and got on to their own.

Just as they got their animals started, a shout from down the street announced that they had been discovered. They held up long enough to throw a fusillade of shots at the huddle of Morehead men, then spurred their animals into a long lope toward the prairie, the night swallowing them up as they passed the last lighted building.

Weldon's little group was safe for the time. They travelled at a fast lope, watching behind them.

Brandlies said, "Well, Dallas has announced himself so nobody can misunderstand him. He wants it all. Now what do we do?"

"I'm doing just what I said I was going to do," Weldon answered. "I'm not leaving my stock over on the other side of his place to be picked off. I'm going to get it and bring it closer home. If you boys want to go along, it would be easier for everybody."

"And that won't be too easy," Turley added, and dropped into a silence. "But I'd better go along and get mine."

"I'll think it over," Brandlies said, "and see you in the morning."

CHAPTER 5

THEY REACHED THE TURNING at the point where the road to the right ran on toward the ranches where these men lived, and the road to the left ran into the land along the river where the nesters lived and which Morehead had proclaimed his intention to buy.

Here Weldon said, "I'll go along with the girl and bring Hap's horse back. See you tomorrow."

The girl said quickly, "It's not much farther. I can walk the rest of the way, and you can take the horse and go with them."

"Forget it," Weldon answered, and turned to the left with the girl, while the rest of the party headed toward home, leaving only the thud of their horses' hooves and the voice of Hap Durham who had suddenly burst out into song.

"I didn't have time to introduce myself," Weldon said to the girl as he rode beside her. "My name is Jim Weldon. I run a few cattle around here."

"I know," the girl said. "My name is June Lockridge. My father is Henry Lockridge. We're nesters, but my father intended to buy the land he is farming. He thought that it was public property. He doesn't want anything that belongs to anybody else." There was a rising defensive anger edging her voice.

"Then why doesn't he buy it? It is public land, and it will be up for sale in the fall. He's got a right to bid for it."

"Not according to Mr. Morehead. He claims everything this side of the mountain road, and he has already told us us to pack up and move."

"Maybe he'd change his mind if you spoke to him," Weldon suggested.

The girl shook her head angrily. "That's what I thought," she snapped. "That's why I was in town."

"What did he say about it?"

"He would have let us stay—on his terms. I just happened not to like his terms."

"I think I understand," Weldon answered. "In that case, don't leave. Stay and bid for your land."

"There wouldn't be any use. My father wouldn't stand a chance against all of those men. Neither would any of the rest of us along the river, even if we stuck together, and there's not much chance of that. Some of the families are going to get packed up and leave right away before the trouble really starts."

"The trouble has already really started," Weldon said dryly. "You might have noticed that tonight."

"I don't know what to do," the girl answered, tapping her horse with the reins. "My father is a strong-willed man and

he doesn't like to take abuse. If we only had a few friends who would join with us—but squatters have no friends, even among themselves."

"You're bitter," Weldon observed. "Why?"

"I'm not bitter, I'm just—" she paused. "Why do you say a thing like that?"

"It's just what I thought I saw."

On nearing the Lockridge cabin, Weldon saw corn already full grown in a field of rows as straight as the cedar rails which fenced the field.

"Your father has done a lot of work here," he said.

"He is a good worker," the girl said quickly. "He is a blacksmith by trade. He is used to working hard."

They got down from the horses and stood in the moonlight outside the cabin, and now Weldon had a chance to study the girl. Perhaps it was because he had had so little contact with women of his own age that his instinct drove him to look at her carefully.

She could hardly have been more than twenty, and yet she had the dignity and gravity of a woman older than that, and she had a carriage that made the plain grey dress and the little hat perched on her black head seem the prettiest garments he had ever seen. Her features were heart shaped—he could not tell the color of her eyes in the moonlight, but the outline of her lips was firm, and yet there was a gentleness about them. Now they were partly opened, as though she were just a little excited at the thought that a man was looking at her and finding her pleasing in his eyes.

He said, "June, you had better not go to see Morehead alone again. And if you have trouble with him, you or your father, I want you to come to see me about it right away."

Again there was that touch of bitterness in her voice. "But we're just nesters. You're a big rancher."

"That's twice you've spoken like that about nesters. Why?"

"Oh—nothing."

He took her by the shoulders, intending to demand an answer. She lifted her head to meet his eyes, and suddenly

he recognized in her face some kind of a hunger, and it reached out and touched him, and he kissed her heavily on the lips, and then dropped his hands.

She stepped back away from him instantly, and he was afraid he had offended her.

She said, with that slightly ironic tone which came so easily to her, "You seem to be in practice. Is that the way you get acquainted with all girls?"

"I'm sorry," he apologized. "That didn't come from practice. It's just the other way round; it does something to a man not to know women. It starves him. I guess."

She looked at him speculatively. "And I happened to be a woman."

"You don't have to beat me over the head for doing it," he said. "You're not just any woman. There was just something about you; something different from any woman I ever happened to know. I just couldn't help it."

Her little laugh was self-conscious. "Maybe it was my fault," she said. "Thanks for all you did. Good night."

He said, "Remember what I told you, if anything happens—"

She answered, moving toward the house, "All right, Jim."

. . . .

Old Rank Heddon had thought himself a dead man until Jim Weldon had got him out of town. Heddon rode through the night with but one thought in his mind—to reach safety.

There was a ghost town up there, a settlement called Wildcat, presided over by a man called Grizzly, who ran a road station, and who knew the secrets of the wild bunch who lived in the darkness of the woods and pursued the dark ways of their hunted lives. This was the place where Heddon could find safety.

He crossed the prairie without stopping by his squalid nester's shack to see his wife and children, and after a while he was safe in the broken rocks of the mountains. He hobbled

his horse and unsaddled him, and he sat down on the saddle blanket on a rock overlooking the prairie, at a point where he could see the scattered twinkling lights in the few ranch-houses.

And sitting here overlooking the prairie over which the war clouds were ready to burst in all their fury, the worthless old man took stock of his neighbors and of himself.

He was a failure, and nobody knew it better than he did. He was a social parasite, doing little in return for his bare existence. He was not even an energetic thief, but would steal a little something when he could not keep food in his belly any other way. He was a man who was afraid of the world on which he had tried to fasten his claims to a miserable existence.

He had had his dreams of his own successes, and they were elaborate, but they remained always dreams, for in his fantasies he always reached his desired goals.

But he had his pride, and like all failures, his pride was as great as his accomplishments were small. And now Dallas Morehead had committed an unpardonable offense against that pride. Morehead had humiliated him by catching him in the act of stealing a calf, and Morehead had heaped insult upon injury by trying to use him as a tool for his own selfish purposes—and under pain of death!

Rank Heddon had suffered this supreme insult to his personal sense of pride and independence; and further, he would have been a dead man, shot for a cattle rustler, except for the intervention of Jim Weldon. Thus Morehead, the man who had done things, had shown his contempt for Rank Heddon, who had spent a lifetime doing nothing.

On the rock overlooking Morehead's vast herd of grazing cattle, Rank Heddon wallowed in his own hatred of the man who had been so contemptuous of him, and who in so doing, had touched Heddon on the tender quick of his own self-contempt.

Heddon nursed his hostility until it became a rage burning with a clear white flame which poured through his veins

and burned out all his fear of the world which had kept him so insignificant through the sum of his years.

He was a dead man, anyway, the moment Dallas Morehead or his men ever laid eyes on him again. He knew too much about Morehead. There was only one way that he could remain alive, and that was to live like a hunted animal, like the other owlhooters higher in the mountains.

In his way, he loved his wife and his boy and girl, for they were the only people in the world who tolerated him. He did not want to leave the only ties he had with humanity, for he knew in his own heart that even the outlaws would have no respect for a man with so little get-up to him.

Rank Heddon got to his feet and picked up his saddle blanket. "Like hell I will run from you," he said to the unconcerned valley. "I'm a dead man anyway. But before you've seen my burying day, Dallas Morehead, I'm going to show you a few things about trampling on the likes of me. I might as well be hung for a cow as a calf—for a hundred cows as one calf. I can't burn any deeper in hell for spreading your own personal guts over the prairie as I can for spreading the guts of one of your damned scrawny calves."

And thus the cold breath of a strong man's contempt blown on the back of his neck fired old Rank Heddon with a determination and an energy that a lifetime of dreaming and wishful thinking had failed to set ablaze. Now hatred burned in him, and its flame seared away all his inaction and his fear.

Then he went and caught up his horse and walked with a step more firm and determined than ever before, and while he rode toward his cabin he sat the saddle with a straighter back than he had ever ridden before, and when he went into his cabin and lit the lamp, he spoke to his family with firmer words than they had ever heard cross his lips.

"I came for my gun," he told his tired wife as she sat up in bed and looked at him in her quiet, hopeless way. "I'll be gone for a few days."

The boy was about fifteen, and he got up off the pallet where he slept on the floor of the kitchen.

"Son," the old man said, "in the morning I want you to ride over to the Long W, and see Mr. Weldon. Now here's what I want you to tell him. Remember it all. Tell him that I been thinking things over, and that I'll be sure to come back for the trial if I'm alive. Tell him that what I told him tonight is the truth, and that I'll swear to it at the trial. And tell him that I'm going to be doing what I can to help in my own way. And if he happens to need me, to send word up to old Grizzly at Wildcat. You got all that?"

The youth had got up and was sitting at the kitchen table in his underwear. He ran his hand through his tousled yellow hair and nodded. And a hurt went through old Rank Heddon, for he sensed that even his son did not take him seriously.

Now he felt a longing for this boy of his own blood, this boy whom he had not given much of a chance. He reached out his hand and ran it through the boy's hair. It was a halting and a fearful gesture, for he knew the boy did not respect him. Rank Heddon knew the pain of loneliness at that moment.

"Don't forget," he said. "And take care of your mama till I get back."

He turned quickly as the boy stared at him in wonderment, and went into the other room where the girl was sitting on her cot with a quilt thrown around her shoulders. Katy was seventeen and her hair was like gold.

The old man stood awkwardly before her and looked at her as if he had seen her for the first time. Then he said hesitantly, "Katy, your eyes are as blue as a cornflower. You're a pretty young lady now, honey."

The girl's surprised eyes went toward her mother, as though she were a little frightened at this strange experience. Her mother had already lain down and had her back to the room.

There was an uncomfortable silence for a long moment while old Rank Heddon searched his mind for the right way to express his thoughts.

"I'm going to be gone for a little while," he said. "There's a man that has made some trouble for me, but Jim Weldon

helped me out of it. Weldon is a good man, and if you need help while I'm away, you go to him and tell him about it. And you help take care of mama, and be a good girl."

The look of puzzlement never left the girl's face, and suddenly old Rank Heddon was overcome by embarrassment. He turned and went and got his gun and holster off the peg and strapped the weapon about his lean old hips. Then he took his rifle off the rack and went out into the kitchen and while his son watched him, he went over to the cracker box nailed to the wall and found his two boxes of rifle shells.

He picked up a handful of biscuits off the red oilcloth-covered table and stuffed them into his pockets. He took a handful of matches and went out the door. He turned and spoke over his shoulder, "Don't forget that message, son. And look after mama."

And then while his weary wife listened and thought her own hopeless thoughts, and while his son and his daughter listened with puzzlement and a touch of relief, they heard him prowl around his barn a few minutes, and then the sound of his horse's hooves fade away across the prairie.

CHAPTER 6

THE NEXT MORNING about an hour after sun-up, Coke Duffy and three of his riders, Leslie Freeman and his son, Junior, and Pancho Malone, sat their horses in the edge of the trees which lined the creek running by the place of the nester Henry Lockridge. They had made a long roundabout ride to reach this point so that Lockridge would not see their approach and be prepared for them. They had already found out that Lockridge was not a spineless man who could be easily scared, and it was not in Duffy, since he experience with Weldon, to give a man a chance to draw a gun on him.

They sat quietly in the woods until they saw Lockridge take his milk bucket and head for the barn, and then by the sounds he made, they followed Lockridge's actions as he threw down hay and eventually started milking his cow.

Smoke coming from the chimney of the house told Duffy that the motherless girl was preparing breakfast for her father.

"Time to do our visiting," Duffy said. "And get between the old man and the house, so he can't get back to his rifle. Hit it, men."

They spurred their horses the few hundred yards from the woods to the house, and Duffy had to smile as he saw Lockridge pop out of the barn with his milk bucket still in his hand, and saw the girl come to the back door with her hands white to the wrists with the flour from the biscuits she was mixing.

There was surprise and concern in the face of the girl, and there was surprise and anger in the face of the husky blacksmith. Lockridge set his milk pail down quickly and started running toward his house as the riders pulled up between him and his back door. This reaction fed the fires of Duffy's cruelty, and pleased him. There was something in him that always demanded continuous proof that he had power to make people afraid of him.

Duffy watched Lockridge approaching, and held up his hand. "Hold it, nester. Don't try to get to the house."

Lockridge ignored the command and kept coming. Duffy lifted his gun. "Do you want me to shoot you dead?" he asked.

Lockridge looked at the white face of his daughter who stood paralyzed in the doorway, and then back at Duffy. He stopped, then asked:

"What do you want here?"

"You know what your orders were. We gave you time to load your wagon and get off our land. You didn't do it, and so we're putting you off."

"But this is not your land. It belongs to the Government, and they're going to sell it to anybody that wants it."

"That's what you think," Duffy answered gruffly. "You had notice that we controlled this land. You didn't get off, so we're putting you off. Start getting your stuff out of your

house if you want to haul it away with you. Otherwise, it will burn, along with the house and barn."

"You wouldn't burn me out," Lockridge answered. "You set fire to my house and I'll kill you if it takes to my dying day."

"You talk like that, and your dying day will be here sooner than you think," Duffy answered. "Now start saving whatever you want to save. And don't take long about it. I'm not taking all morning on this job."

Lockridge saw that he was cut off from the kitchen where his gun was, and saw that to resist these armed men would mean only the loss of the little stuff he had. He was not whipped, but it was a wiser thing to submit to the destruction of his empty house than it would be to resist and lose its contents as well. His shoulders fell.

"All right," he answered, "I'll get the stuff out. Let me pass."

"That's showing sense," Duffy replied. "Let him by, boys."

He watched Lockridge's shoulders slump wearily as the blacksmith passed him and went into the door of the kitchen. The girl stepped aside to let him pass.

Duffy's eyes took the girl in from head to foot, studying her form as he might judge a cow. She looked back at him and he did not miss the anger and scorn in her face.

"Listen, girl," Duffy said, "don't take this too hard. There's always something like this going on when nesters try to step on cattlemen's toes, but you don't have to suffer for it. I think you and me could make some kind of arrangement that would put you in a better position than living like this—"

He saw the rage which flushed the girl's face before she turned her back to him and started back into the house.

"Wait," he said. "I could do a whole lot for you if you wasn't so uppity. I ain't a bad fellow."

The girl took a step up on to the door sill, and suddenly Duffy slid off his horse and caught her by the arm. "I said for you to wait and listen to me," he snapped.

The girl turned with her eyes blazing and slapped his face.

"Why you damned gillflirt," he roared, "I'll teach you—" He grabbed her around the waist as she tried to escape him. He heard the thudding feet of old Lockridge coming from the other room, and looked up to see the old man appear in the door lifting his rifle.

Duffy pulled the girl to him so that Lockridge could not shoot without endangering the girl, and then he drew his pistol, and during Lockridge's moment of inaction, he threw a quick shot over the girl's shoulder at the old blacksmith.

Lockridge fell to the floor with a bullet in the flesh of his leg. His rifle fell from his hand, and before he could crawl to it Duffy, dragging the girl by the wrist, reached the weapon and picked it up.

The horsemen from the outside had dismounted and now came pouring into the kitchen with their guns out. Duffy, still holding the fighting girl by the wrist, turned on them.

"You men drag that old geezer out under that tree and set fire to the place. To hell with this trying to be reasonable with fools. There's a can of coal oil by the stove. Soak that tablecloth in it, Pancho, and put the fire to this dump."

He dragged the girl out into the yard despite her scratching and clawing. "You're a wild young filly, ain't you?" he grinned. "Well, sister, my specialty is taming that kind."

The girl twisted in his graps and clawed his face, her fingernails drawing four red tracks from his forehead to his chin. Duffy slapped her with his open palm.

"Behave yourself," he growled.

Freeman and his son came dragging the old blacksmith out of the kitchen door by his hands as though he were a bag of feed.

"Stop it!" the girl said angrily. "Who are you people to tell people what to do? Does that Mr. Morehead think he's king around here?"

"Exactly, girl. Maybe not right now, but he will be before this is over. And I'm going to be his *segundo*. So, you'd better be changing your attitude toward me before it is too late."

"I couldn't change it," the girl answered with a sudden

calm, "because there is no opinion lower than the one I already have of you."

Duffy laughed, and still holding her wrist, called out to old Les Freeman, "Come over here." And when the lean old man approached, he said, "I want you to take this girl up to Grizzly's, and tell him to hold her for me. She's a spitfire, so warn him not to let her get away. Hear me?"

Old Les Freeman was tall and lean and taciturn. His face was hatchet-blade thin, except for the lump that his eternal cud of chewing tobacco made in his cheek. His sorrowful eyes were washed-out grey, the stubble of beard was grey, and the bib overalls that hung loosely from his shoulders were a faded grey.

"Women is always trouble," Freeman said.

"And I'm a trouble shooter," Duffy snapped. "Take this girl up to Wildcat and turn her over to Grizzly, like I tell you."

"Did you ever try to take a woman where she didn't want to go?" Freeman objected mournfully. "They're worse'n trying to take a calf away from its maw. I can't drag her all the way up there less'n I use a lariat on her."

Duffy gave this a minute's thought, then turned to face the girl. "You want to see your dad shot dead?" he asked. "I can do it, easy."

"No. You wouldn't dare."

"I can show you if I have to," Duffy returned. "But you can save him if you want to."

"How?"

"You just go along quiet with Freeman and behave yourself, and your dad can lie around here till somebody comes along to give him a hand. But if you give Freeman any trouble, I'll finish your old man without batting an eye, and then I'll take you up there, myself. Which will it be?"

The girl grasped at the opportunity to at least delay the disaster. If she fought, she did not doubt but what Duffy would make good his threat. She had nothing to lose by delaying matters, and she breathed a prayer that Jim Weldon

would learn of this and make good his implied promise of help.

"All right," she said. "I'll go with your man if you promise not to bother my father any more. You've done enough to him already."

"Well, get on, then," Duffy answered. "We're going to burn this place like we said, but we'll let your dad lie there, and send somebody after him if we run into anybody."

He released the girl, and she went along with old Freeman, who saddled one of her father's horses for her and led the animal out. Then he struck a match on the seat of his overalls and threw it into a pile of hay in the manger.

He got his horse and mounted it beside the one she was on.

"Listen, girl," he told her, out of hearing of Duffy. "This ain't my idea at all. Me, I don't want no part of no woman no time. I had one of my own once, but—" His voice trailed off and he did not finish his thought.

The girl rode off toward the mountains with him. She looked back once and saw the tall column of black smoke pouring from the door and windows of the poor cabin which was the only thing she had had to call home. Nothing would be saved.

Then, clamping her jaws to keep from giving way to her tears, she set her face toward the mountains and rode along with her taciturn captor.

Old Freeman did not speak once as they rode.

CHAPTER 7

JIM WELDON'S GROUP was ready to start soon after daylight, their objective the back end of the range Morehead claimed. From his own ranch, he was taking Ed Hay and Hap Durham and another rider. Mack Rennison was along, and Brandlies and Turley, together with three of their riders.

They were about to start when Duke Forrest came along with one of his men. Weldon went over to him. "Mighty nice of you to come along," he said. "But there's no reason for

you to get yourself mixed up in our troubles. This is cows, and you run horses."

"Don't want to miss the fun," Forrest shrugged. "Besides, it's not cows, it's land. And I happen to have my diggings on a piece of this land, the same as the rest of you."

"You're mighty welcome," Weldon said. "But it might get rough."

The party rode north and west, around the bend of the River and across the flatland grass, heading at an angle toward the point where the mountains died down to a field of geologic junk, the Badlands.

It was Weldon himself who first noticed that the cattle wearing his brand were few and far apart along this good piece of grass, and he called Ed Hay's attention to it.

"Only brands I've noticed have been Morehead stuff," Ed answered. "Wonder if he's already swept our stuff up?"

"He's not a man to go off half-cocked," Brandlies pointed out. "If he told us not to come looking for our stuff, it's a thing he thought out beforehand. He probably knew we wouldn't find it when we did come."

"If he was going to clean us out himself, he'd have known we'd likely come a-looking when he laid down his challenge, and so he would have gathered the stuff before showing his hand." That was Turley's opinion.

Weldon called a halt. "Let's spread out and see what's what," he said. He was beginning to feel that something had already happened. "We'd better scatter about five hundred yards apart and go to reading some brands. Ride due west."

They scattered out in skirmish formation and continued riding, each man examining the brands on the cattle nearest him as they rode. They kept this up half an hour when Mack Rennison broke away from his end of the line, waved his arm in a signal, and all the men converged on him.

They were about a quarter of a mile from the rock beds which made up the Badlands, and Rennison was down off his horse studying the evidence of a whole herd being driven

off the grass and in the direction of the rocks. They all joined him and studied the markings.

"Looks like our stuff has been gathered and run into the Badlands," Turley observed. "But a funny thing, ain't but one set of horse's tracks, and they look brand new. I'd say they wasn't over a few hours old." He looked at Weldon who had dismounted and was walking around the mute evidence.

"Must have been fifty head passed this way," Weldon observed. "And they can't be very far ahead of us."

Duke Forrest stopped by Weldon, got his attention and pointed high into the sky above the rock beds. Weldon, following his finger, saw a dozen or twenty almost invisible black dots circling slowly overhead, coasting around in wide circles on idle wings.

"Buzzards!" he said. "Must be a dead cow over that way."

"A dead cow?" Forrest asked softly.

Weldon looked at him sharply. "What do you mean?"

"I hope I'm wrong," Forrest answered. "But I can't forget that you men will need to sell off a lot of your stock to get money to pay for your land. If you didn't have stock to sell off—"

"Forrest," Weldon said tightly. "If you've guessed right, I don't want any man here to lay a gun on Morehead. I want that job for myself."

He remounted quickly and rode back to where the other riders were bunched together beside their horses. He pointed out the gathering flock of buzzards to them. "Come on," he said. "Let's go see what those bald-headed devils are interested in."

They made fast time following the clear trail of the cattle into the Badlands. This part of the country was a broad waste of volcanic rock and scant sagebrush. There were stones and potholes, and towering rock needles and washed-out caves and extinct river-beds where a little topsoil had managed to settle and support thin tufts of bunchgrass. It was a desolate wasteland without pattern or sense. It was without water

and without trails except a few made by wolves and coyotes. Even the deer avoided it.

"It don't make sense to me," Ed Hay said as they rode. "There ain't no place to take and hold stolen cattle if they was going to change the brands on it, and there ain't no trail that would take the stuff to any place they could sell it."

"They could take it there and kill it, just to get rid of it, couldn't they?" Weldon asked. "Then what would we have to ship this fall?"

That was the first time the thought came to the rest of the men, and they quickened the pace of their animals as they followed the easy trail the cattle had made.

And then they came upon a sight that stopped them cold. Fifty head of stock. Every cow and every calf was dead, killed by a rifle bullet. They lay scattered just as they had fallen on the trail, none of them skinned out, none of them quartered for meat—all of them bearing brands of the little ranchers who made up this grim party of horsemen who rode among them with tight lips and fire in their eyes.

It was surprising how little was said as the men saw their slaughtered stock, for every man was burning with his own rage, every man was making his own plans to get within gunshot of Dallas Morehead and give him a dose of the same medicine he had given these cattle. They milled about for a long while in stunned silence.

"Nothing we can do here," Weldon said after a while, and turned his horse back on the trail.

They followed him out, no man talking, the silence broken only by the creak of saddle leather and the jingle of bit chains and spurs.

When they came again out on to the prairie they stopped their horses, and wordlessly shifted them into a kind of mounted huddle around Weldon.

"What do we do?" Brandlies asked tightly. "Go now and burn him out? The quicker he's disposed of once for all, the sooner we'll have peace. I've seen all I want to see."

Turley agreed with him, and Rennison sat his horse signifi-

cantly loading his left-hand pistol. He was the only one who wore two handguns, though several had rifles in their saddleboots. They were a tight-lipped bunch, and there was grim purpose stamped on all their faces.

"I'm not satisfied entirely," Weldon said.

He saw surprise come to the faces of his friends.

"How come?" Brandlies asked. "Ain't you seen enough?"

"Too much," Weldon said, "There's something smells besides those cows."

"What is it?"

"I don't just know exactly. But it don't smell right."

"Why not? He wants us crippled so he can buy up everything, don't he? And killing off the stock we intend to use for money cinches it for him, don't it?"

"It does, but would he cinch it for himself that way? Dallas is not a fool. He's getting ready to make trouble for us, and he's got the men to back himself up. But—here's the catch in it. If he did a thing like this, he knows we'd come after him with every man we could get hold of. He knows there'd be plenty of shooting in a hurry. He'd lose men and we'd lose men. And he knows we wouldn't stop till we put a bullet in him personally. He don't want that, to my way of thinking."

"Then what do these dead cattle mean?"

"I just don't know," Weldon admitted, "but somehow I don't believe they mean what they look like they mean. I can't figure it, myself."

"Then what do we do? Just sit and take it, like nice boys?"

"No," Weldon said with sudden firmness. "I'm going to see if I can find out what they mean."

"How?"

"I'm going to talk to Morehead about them."

"Now you're talking," Rennison said. "And I just hope he opens his trap the wrong way."

"Let's get going," Brandlies said eagerly.

"Hold it," Weldon said, calmly. "We don't all have to go. I'll see him personally, and I'll get it straight from him by myself."

"Don't be a damned fool. You'd walk right into a trap."

"I don't think so," Weldon said. "If we all went, that would give him excuse enough to cut down on us, and there would be a lot of killing. If I go by myself, he can't afford to slaughter me. It would be too raw. He'll have to hold off and think of some way he can do it without branding himself as a butcher."

"He's down in my book as a butcher, already," Brandlies objected. "He's just the boss cutthroat of a cutthroat crew. Look what he planned for that nester."

"He planned it, but he didn't finish his job. And he had an excuse. He hasn't a good excuse to cut me down yet. You boys go on and comb our stuff out and head it toward my place. I'll join you as soon as I have this pow-wow with Dallas."

Not waiting to hear further objections, he cut across the prairie in the direction of Morehead's ranch quarters.

Forrest watched him moving along, and then said to Hap and to the others, "There's a man with a level head. He's probably saved half a dozen of us from getting killed."

Hap grinned at him. "Maybe he's like you—just don't like grave digging on a hot day. It's a plumb selfish attitude for a man to take toward his friends."

CHAPTER 8

WELDON DID NOT FOLLOW TRAILS, but cut straight through the grass toward Morehead's ranch quarters, and came at last to within sight of the house and barns. From a mile or so away he saw men moving around the place, and when he came to within close enough range for his horse to be identified, he saw one of the men cut away from the barns and head for the house.

He rode up to the front just as a man came around the house from the rear. Weldon looked him over and saw that he was not one of the four men that Morehead worked regularly. The man had the mountain mark on him, the shifty

look and the tight mouth of one of the wild bunch from up around Wildcat. He wore his gun low on his hip, the holster tied against his thigh with a pigging string. A heavy load for a man to carry for working around a barn, Weldon noted.

He looked around and saw others at the back of the place, but they were strangers to him, too. He did not see Duffy nor the Freemans nor the half-breed Pancho Malone.

The man was watching him, silently questioning him.

"Tell Dallas Morehead to come out, if he's here." Weldon said without preliminary. "I want to talk with him."

The man swept him with a final glance and stepped up on to the porch and went into the house. The men around the barns had drifted into the bunkhouse, and drifted out again, now wearing guns. Weldon smiled tightly; they'd had their orders when Morehead recognised him riding up.

Then Dallas Morehead came out the front door wearing his nickel-plated weapon, and Weldon knew that he had gone into the house to put it on. Men didn't wear heavy guns around their own homes unless they expected to have use for them. Morehead hitched his gunbelt up as he stopped on the porch and tried to read sign on Weldon's face.

"Dallas," Weldon said promptly, "I was back on your range looking for my stock. I found some of it—driven into the Badlands and shot. That wasn't the work of rustlers. They haven't any reason to destroy a man's herd without getting some profit out of the meat. You're trying to clean off your range, according to the notice you sent us boys last night. Is this the way you intend doing it?"

Weldon watched Morehead carefully as he spoke, and there was a strange expression on the man's face, one he took for a fleeting glance of puzzlement. Morehead scratched his chin and looked at the man who came back out the door behind him.

"You know anything about that, Josh?"

The man shook his head without interest, and Morehead turned back to Weldon.

"I don't know what happened to your stock. I—"

"I just told you what happened to it," Weldon interrupted sharply. "What I want to know is whether you did it, or had it done."

"I didn't kill any of your stock, and I didn't have it done. But on the other hand, I don't give a damn what happens to it. And still further, I told you to keep off my range without my permission. If you've got cattle on my grass, you can drive it off at the round-up, this fall."

"There wouldn't be a cow of mine alive by round-up time," Weldon answered. "So, some of the rest of the boys and I are going to drive our stuff off this range right now."

"You're not going to set foot on my range right now, nor any other time unless I tell you that you can," Morehead answered. "I'm running this land, and I'll have no more trespassing on it. I've lost enough stock—"

"Cut it out" Weldon snapped. "You're not concerned about a nester butchering a calf or two of yours. You've got bigger irons in the fire, and I think I know the brand on 'em. But I want to be fair to you about this dead stock. You say you didn't kill it, and so I'll want proof before I go against you for doing it. But if I get that proof, Dallas, you'd better be ready to shoot on sight, because that's what I'm going to do."

"You'd better be sure of your proof," Morehead snapped. "And in the meantime, stay off my grass."

"You don't own a foot of that grass yet," Weldon answered. "And I've already told you that the boys and I are cutting out our stuff—and cutting it out to-day. We're already doing it."

Morehead said, "I'll see whether you cut stock on my land or not. Josh, take your boys and ride out there, and if you see one man drive one animal one step across my grass, stop him! Stop all of them! I'll show these two-bit rannahans whether they can ride over me or not."

"Dallas," Weldon said coldly, "you'd better get yourself an army big enough to do the job before you start. That is not your land yet, and we've got as much right to ride over it as you have. I'm just warning you."

"We will see about that," Morehead answered. "Josh, bring your boys around. I want to make them acquainted with this man."

Josh's "boys" had been hovering close enough, and at a call from this man there were more than a dozen men who trooped around the house and scattered around the front porch.

All gunnies, Weldon saw. All men with the mark of the owlhoot on them. Men that Grizzly must have dug up for Morehead. Weldon was puzzled a moment, not knowing why Morehead had felt the need to recruit this many men merely to sweep the nesters off his place. And he wondered where Duffy was with the regular crew.

And then an idea came to him, an explanation of the possible use these men could be put to. He was certain now that Morehead was getting ready to let these owlhooters and rustlers clean his range of all brands other than his own, and let these boys take the stock they stole in payment for their services. They could sell it over the mountains and make a good piece of money. Thus Morehead would have all the little owners crippled for money before the auction, and at no cost of money or illegal activity on his own part.

This idea struck Weldon full blown, and he was fully convinced that it was the answer to these men being here. But in that case, why the fifty head of stock that was led off into the Badlands and wilfully slaughtered? That didn't make sense in the light of this business.

Morehead spoke to the crowd of owlhooters. "I want you men to meet Jim Weldon. He's a man who speaks in a voice like thunder. He takes big steps, and when his feet touch the ground the earth trembles and the prairies dogs get scared and come out of their holes to keep them from caving in on them. When he walks in the mud he leaves a series of ten-acre lakes behind him, and when he rides he leaves a cyclone trailing along behind him. I want you to look on his face so you'll remember the sight of a mighty man."

Weldon threw a contemptuous glance at the motley crew, and asked Morehead, "Do you think you've got quite enough

men, Dallas, to burn out a couple of nesters' shacks? It's a risky business for just a handful of puny backshooters like you've got here for your protection."

The man named Josh looked at Morehead, whose face was turning red with his rising anger at this insult. "If this is the man that's making you trouble," he said, "he don't look to me like bullets would bounce off him. But maybe you like to hear him talk like he's talking to you."

"Shut up," Morehead snapped. "I'm running this show."

Then he turned his hatred on Weldon. "You've made the wrong move, Weldon," he said. "You're a cowman, and your friends are cowmen. You've watched nesters come in here and settle along the water, and fence it in. We were here first, and we need that water, but you've stood by and watched it being taken up, and you're not doing anything about it. You're acting the fool. If you want to keep on running cattle here, then you've got to keep it cattle country, and keep it open and unfenced. But you men wouldn't see that. Well, I see it, and I'm protecting myself, whether you like it or not. I'm protecting my land ahead of time, like any sensible man would do. To hell with the rest of you. You're either with me or against me, and since you're against me, then I'm going to treat you like any other trespassers. You're not even thinking of driving that stuff off my land without my sayso, and you'll see that before the sun goes down tonight."

"Dallas," Weldon answered, "you run off at the mouth too much."

Josh said, "Well, we're all here, Morehead. What are we waiting for?"

Morehead looked around at the men bunched in the yard, some on one side of Weldon, some on the others, and some to the rear. They had Weldon completely surrounded, and there was a slight shifting of position among them as the silence began to grow heavy. Weldon didn't have a chance to escape such a trap.

Weldon got a glimpse of the men out of the corners of his eyes as he kept facing Morehead. He knew their kind. These

men knew the smell of gunpowder and the color of a man's blood, and they were the kind that cared little about why that blood flowed, so long as they had the odds with them, as they had now.

They were tensed up and expectant, and Weldon knew that there was only a thin curtain between him and death, a curtain they could push him through at the slightest break in the tension, or the first sign from Josh who seemed to be their leader.

So this was what it was like to be trapped! Weldon felt a kind of sickness in the pit of his stomach, and knew that it was the fear that an animal must feel when it sees that its escape is completely cut off.

Seeing these things, he accepted the fact that his death was at hand. He had a moment or so remaining, and he would live that out to its fullest. And so, as the silence piled up against them all, he gave his attention back to Morehead who stood on his porch and built up his destructive urge toward a point where he could give the signal to bear down on Weldon and end this business.

"What are you waiting for?" Josh asked Morehead.

"Leave him alone," Weldon answered. "He's figuring; trying to decide whether you boys have got a chance to kill me so dead with one shot that I can't put a bullet through his skull before I die. He knows that is what it will cost him."

Morehead knew about Weldon having once outshot a fast gunman, and he knew that Weldon would not break under fire. And it was not a comfortable thought to know that Weldon would be emptying his gun at him, and him alone, as long as he could pull the trigger. Morehead did not like these odds, and he came to a quick decision that it would be safer to postpone the killing of Weldon until the odds were better.

He turned to Josh. "This man is just full of wind. He talks big, but don't pay any attention to him. Take your men like I told you, and hit for the back range, and break up any cutting of stock you see there. I'll send Duffy and the boys along to help you as soon as they get back."

"You letting this man ride off?" Josh said, his eyes opening in disbelief.

"For the time, yes. Get on about your job."

Josh blew out his breath disgustedly, and Weldon heard other noises that expressed the contempt with which the mountain men had suddenly invested Morehead. Morehead must have sensed the same thing, for his face turned beet red, and he shouted furiously at Josh, "Take those men on and do what you were told!"

The men trooped around the corner of the house.

When they were gone, Weldon said, "I don't suppose you'd want to settle this man to man, would you, Dallas? If you wouldn't shoot me with a dozen gunnies to back you up—"

"Listen," Morehead snapped. "I'm no damned fool. Only a sucker would let a foolish gun-pride interfere with his business. You can't get anywhere popping pistols at each other, and I'm too busy to play games like that. And you're just trying to strut a little because you once killed a man."

"That is not it," Weldon said quietly. "I made that offer for one reason only. I've got a bunch of friends out there on your back range, rounding up their stuff before you invite these owlhooters to run it off. Somebody is going to die when the shooting starts, and I thought maybe I could save a few lives by playing it out with you man to man. Is that too steep a game for your sporting blood?"

"You're a damned fool," Morehead answered, and turned and went into the house, leaving Weldon alone on horseback in his front yard.

Weldon said, "Well, hell, I tried," and turned and rode back towards his friends.

CHAPTER 9

WELDON HIT ACROSS Morehead's range openly, taking an easy canter in the direction of the range his friends would be working. He picked up their trail at the point near the Badlands where they had found the dead cattle and followed

it until he came upon the men. They had gathered up close to two hundred head of stock already, and at this point there were many more cattle wearing the various brands of the valley.

Forrest, Brandlies and Turley were holding the stuff while the rest were busy cutting their brands out of the scattered clumps of grazing stock. Ed Hay rode up with Durham, driving a small cut to throw into the herd, and they rode over to Weldon.

Hap said, "I'm sure glad to see you back."

"Why?" Weldon asked.

"Forrest has got me convinced that digging graves ain't no work for a man in the summertime. Have a nice visit with Morehead?"

Brandlies and Turley had joined them, and were listening for his answer.

"Somehow, I got the idea that Morehead was surprised to hear about those dead cows. He had a bunch of mountain men down at his place, and I have a feeling that he had got them to come down and help themselves to our stock. In which case, killing that stuff last night wouldn't have made sense."

"There's got to be an answer," Brandlies argued. "So, how are you going to make it make sense?"

"That, I don't rightly know yet," Weldon answered. "It's got to fit in, but I still can't figure it. I reckon we'd just better drop it for the present, and get this stuff off Morehead's land as quickly as we can. It's going to be rough enough as it is."

"What does he think about us doing this?" Turley asked.

"I gathered that he was unhappy about it. He said he was going to stop us."

"Boy, howdy!" Hap exclaimed. "I owe them boys something for spilling my whiskey last night. Reckon they're sure enough going to try to stop us?"

"Morehead says he is," Weldon answered. "And I wouldn't be so pleased about it, if I were you, Hap. It won't be just Duffy and the Freemans. Morehead has got a dozen gentle-

men down from the mountains that are itching for some target practice. I was just introduced to them."

"He's really going to try to stop us, is he?" Brandlies asked soberly.

"I'm afraid he is. He's got enough men, and he knows he's got to make good his threat. He can't get out of it very well."

"What do you think we ought to do, then?"

"It will take us till dark to push this stuff you've already gathered over on to my range. I think we'd better get it moving, so we'll be off his ground before night. There might be a lot of importance attached to just whose ground this fight takes place on."

Hap asked, "Who does he think he is? I'd just as soon lay his ears back right here as any other place."

"The least we'd lose would be the work we've already done, because we couldn't hold this herd during a gun battle. So we'd have all the rounding up to do over again. No, we'd better get moving."

"When do you think he'll hit us?"

"Whenever he thinks the odds are best for himself, but before the day is over."

Weldon called the men in with a wave of his arm, and explained to the rest of them, not mentioning the tight jam he had escaped from. "Let's get 'em moving," he finished. "Keep 'em bunched tight."

The land along here was rolling, knee deep in tan grass, and there were no fences nor broad trails through it. It offered no concealment to this little group, but at the same time, it offered no concealment from which Morehead could spring a surprise attack on them. Weldon calculated this, picturing in his mind's eye the whole lay of the land from this point to his own ranch.

With this in mind, he said, "There's more than enough of us to drive this stock. We'd better do it this way; four of you keep the herd moving. The rest of us will drop back behind you to cover you in case Morehead comes at us from the rear. I'll drop back still farther, and stop at the top of each ridge

and keep an eye out to see that they don't try to come up on us from some of the hollows between the ridges. If I see 'em, I'll fire three shots, and then come up and join the bunch to the rear of the cattle. You with the herd don't stop to join the fight, but keep on driving it to my place. It matters a whole lot whether or not Morehead succeeds in keeping us from taking our stuff off his land. If he manages to stop us, there'll be no stopping him from then on."

And that was the way they worked it as they strung out. Ed Hay and Hap Durham and a couple of other men strung the herd out and got it started at as fast a clip as they could well drive it, disregarding the fact that they were melting meat off the animals at this pace in the sun. Behind them, always covering the ridge over which they had just passed, rode Forrest, Brandlies and Turley, and the three or four hands they had brought along. And still farther behind, always on the second ridge behind the herd, and one ridge behind the rear guard, Weldon covered their back trail, keeping his alert watchfulness directed toward Morehead's ranch quarters, and to the curving hollows between the ridges they had just passed over.

Thus the hours passed. Midday came and dragged along into mid-afternoon beneath the sun that was taking meat off the cattle and stamina out of the men. A cloud of dust boiled upward from the hooves of the herd, and there was no possibility that Morehead could have failed to locate it if he had been searching for it. That puzzled Weldon and the others as they rode.

The cattle got tired, and drank at one of the ponds they passed, and after that they were reluctant to push on, and had to be driven hard, with a continuous shouting and shoving. The cattle bawled their protest, clouds of dust floated high in the afternoon heat like a pillar of tan smoke—and still there was no sight of Morehead and his men.

They were within a mile of Weldon's ranch quarters now, within half a mile of the road that bordered the land he

claimed, and Weldon felt safe in leaving his post and joining Forrest and the rest of the rear guard.

"What do you make of it?" Rennison asked. "And what do we do with this stuff?"

"I don't know what to make of it," Weldon admitted, "but I know damned well that he'll have to play out this hand one way or another. We'll throw the stuff into that forty-acre fenced pasture of mine for the night."

"We could turn it loose as soon as we hit your range. That would get it off his land, and at the same time we'd be winning this hand."

"It would scatter overnight, and then Morehead could claim that we ran off a lot of his stuff. I'd rather keep it bunched so he can look it over if he wants to, and then he can't make a claim like that."

"I guess you're right," Rennison admitted. "But I hate to give him the satisfaction of getting to look it over."

"It'll be more than that, I suspect," Weldon said cautiously. "He's not even fixing to let us get away with this. He'd lose face for keeps if he did."

They reached Weldon's fenced meadow when the sun was low, and Weldon and Forrest, who could be considered a neutral party under the circumstances, took positions by the opened barbed-wire gate and checked the brands on the cattle as they passed into the enclosure, making sure there was no Circle M cow in the bunch.

As the last of the cattle went into the meadow, a man rode across the prairie toward them, a lean man on a sorrel horse. The men waited for him, nerves on hair trigger.

Then Brandlies said, disgustedly, "Heddon. I thought he'd be hid in the mountains by now."

Heddon rode up on his sweated horse and pulled over to Weldon. "Got the makings?" he asked. "I ain't had a smoke since yesterday." His eyes were red-rimmed, and he looked weary.

Weldon tossed him the tobacco and watched him fashion a

cigarette and light it, sucking in the smoke greedily. Then Heddon returned the tobacco, and asked:

"Did my boy see you this morning? I told him to drop over and give you a message."

"Didn't see anything of him," Weldon answered. "I left early."

"Yeah, I know. Well, I just told him to tell you that I would be on hand when my trial comes up. Don't want to cost a neighbor anything, and didn't want you to think I planned to run out on you."

Heddon's eyes were on the cattle that had headed for the pond in the meadow. "Nice lot of stock," he commented. "Couldn't blame some people if they took a fancy to it."

"I don't reckon I get your meaning," Weldon returned, studying the man. He saw that there was something on Heddon's mind, and he waited to hear it.

"I was just wondering," he said, "what a bunch of mountain men with Dallas Morehead and his crew at the head of them would be doing hidin' down there in the creek bottom."

Weldon, and in fact the whole crew, looked off toward the barely visible tops of a strip of woods that lined Pecan Creek, which ran along to the left of the fenced meadow, and which separated the meadow from Weldon's ranch quarters. The ground at that point was hidden by a slight rise on this side of the creek. The creek was Weldon's main source of water, cutting squarely through his lands from its spring-fed source in the mountains to the point where it emptied into the Pushmoline River.

"Sounds like Dallas is planning on a real massacre," Ed Hay observed soberly.

"He couldn't have picked a better place for it," Weldon admitted, "nor a better way to clean us all out at one time. What makes you think he's in the bottom, Heddon?"

"A jackrabbit keeps his eyes on the dog that's chasing him, don't he?" Heddon answered. "I've been watching him ever since he left his house."

In that event, Weldon thought, but did not say, Heddon must also have seen him—Weldon—visit the place.

"Well, thanks, Heddon," he said. "You've saved us from walking into a trap."

"I just wanted you to know that I don't hold it against you for scaring me up last night. I should have told you the whole business without you having to make me do it."

"Forget it," Weldon said. "Well, we're heading for home, and it might be pretty hot before we get there. I won't keep you any longer."

"I'd kind of like to ride along, if you don't mind," Heddon said. "I thought maybe there'd be a bite to eat you could spare me."

"Glad to have you eat with us," Weldon said. "But I'm thinking about getting across that creek. We might have trouble."

"I know," Heddon answered. "But I've got a rifle, and I reckon you can understand that I wouldn't mind using it if Morehead stood between me and a hot meal."

"Suit yourself," Weldon answered. "But you might get hurt. Morehead has got us outnumbered a little."

There was a vehemence in Heddon's voice as he made his answer. It surprised Weldon, and made him look at the man sharply as he spoke.

"I might get hurt," Heddon said, "but it wouldn't mean a thing. The likes of me is always getting hurt in other men's wars, and always will get hurt in 'em, because men like me ain't big enough to have wars of their own. I'm a little late getting around to it, but I've got me a war of my own with Morehead. I ain't been worth much to myself or my family or to my friends. But still and all, a man like me gets tired of being trampled on once in a while, and I've done got tired of it. If I live over this, I might amount to something or I might not, but one thing's for sure, Morehead dug a hole for me and tried to shove me into it. And so I've got me a war on with him, win or lose. I'll ride with you, and when they hit, just say what you want done."

When Heddon quit talking and closed his mouth on his cigarette, he was breathing deeply through his nose, and Weldon saw that the man was under a terrible emotional strain of some kind. It was a surprise to Weldon that Heddon's feelings ran so deep.

"It's your choice," Weldon answered, and gave his attention to the forthcoming trouble.

The sun was dipping in the Badlands now, almost visibly falling through the few remaining degrees of its arc, a blazing copperish ball of fire in the summer haze. The men milling around on horseback made long shadows against the ground, and they drooped in the saddle, for they had done a hard day's work under a tremendous strain. Men and horses were exhausted.

These things came to Weldon's mind as he faced his puzzle. They needed rest; they could avoid this fight by taking the long way around, skirting the wooded ford across the creek where Morehead's men were hidden. The fight could easily be postponed, at least.

And yet Weldon knew that for deeper reasons, the fight could not be avoided. He had seen a thing in Morehead's face this morning which he had not noticed before. It was an arrogance which Morehead had exposed at that meeting, and it told Weldon what was in Morehead's mind in as clear a fashion as though he had spoken the words.

Weldon told the others how he saw it, and they were in agreement with him. They had dismounted to rest their horses and were sitting around on their heels, getting a smoke and a rest, and talking over the news that Heddon had brought.

Heddon joined them, but Weldon noted that the man took a position a little back of the circle instead of in it with the rest of them. Heddon was conscious of the fact that he was a part of this group, but that they did not completely accept him and take him seriously as a full man. But for once in his life, Heddon was driven by a purpose, and these men fitted into his plans, and so he did not feel resentment at this attitude, to which he was no stranger. At this moment he felt more of

a man than he had ever felt in his life, for he knew he was part of the ebb and the flow of the life around him, and not a mere piece of flotsam drifting as the tide carried him.

It was Ed Hay, Weldon's cautious and generally silent foreman, who was talking. "What do we do, Jim? Just ride up against that bunch of trees and have it explode in our faces?"

"Not exactly. Morehead has the advantage of concealment if we rode up now. But it will be dark in a few minutes, and that will cancel off his advantage. And then we can approach the ford from the left instead of straight in front of it. That way, we will be in the trees the same as he is when we hit the ford. We'll at least have an equal chance with him."

Heddon tossed away his cigarette casually and stood up and stretched himself, then stepped easily over to his horse and slid his rifle out of the saddle boot, and came and sat down again with it in his lap.

Weldon took a quick look at him, but could not read the meaning of this move, which looked too casual to be genuine. He kept an eye on Heddon without seeming to do so, while Heddon nursed the rifle like a seated squaw nursing her baby.

And then as the men talked, he saw Heddon lift the rifle, still with a very casual gesture, as though he were afraid his movements would attract attention. There was something in Heddon's mind, Weldon knew, but he could not make it out.

And then with a smooth quickness, Heddon shouldered his rifle and aimed it directly between Hap Durham and Duke Forrest, a space of less than three feet.

Heddon pulled the trigger just as Hap yelled and fell back. The imperturbable Forrest merely turned and looked at Heddon as the man pulled the trigger and the rifle roared.

The bullet sped between the seated men—and whistled on toward the rise hiding the creek. Weldon had pulled his pistol, but he had been too puzzled to aim it now at Heddon. And then he saw that Heddon had not been aiming at Durham, but at the rise of ground a few hundred yards distant. Weldon turned his gaze that way.

He saw a man's head just over the rise, and as Heddon's gun roared, the man behind the rise jumped up like a jack-in-the-box. He threw both arms upward, and dropped a rifle out of an extended hand. Then the man fell forward on his face, his whole body exposed on the top of the rise.

"Damned sneak," Heddon said. "Spying on us." He angrily levered the spent shell out of his gun, injecting another one and snapping on the safety. "He won't spy on anybody else."

The men in the circle around Heddon jumped up as they saw what happened, and understood its significance. Weldon reached over and picked up Heddon's empty shell off the ground, then also got to his feet.

"They know we're here now," Rennison said. "That is, if that man had any chance to signal 'em, or if they watched him die."

"Yeah," Weldon said. "They know it." He turned to Heddon. "Thanks again, fellow. You've got good eyes."

"It was a pleasure," Heddon said tensely. "You'll never know how much of a pleasure it was."

The dusk was turning into a slate grey darkness now and Weldon measured the light in terms of the minutes it would last. "He knows he won't surprise us at the ford," he said to the group. "He won't want to get caught in his own trap. I think we'd better expect him to rush us. You boys got plenty of shells?"

Some of them had spare boxes of ammunition in their saddle bags, others had them in their pockets. Some of the boys took the spare shells out of their gunbelts and dropped them loosely into their pockets, where they could get at them quicker. One man took his rifle off his saddle, threw a couple of dry shots at a passing pairie owl for aim, and then sat down on the ground and cut himself several chews of tobacco from his plug and dropped them into his shirt pocket where they would be handy.

Weldon took two boxes each of pistol shells and rifle shells, emptying the pistol shells into his right shirt pocket and the

rifle shells into the left-hand pocket. He took his rifle from his saddle boot and filled the magazine with shells.

Heddon was on his hands and knees, with the side of his head flat against the ground, listening Indian fashion.

"They're coming," he announced. "I hear 'em."

Weldon said, "Tie your horses to the fence posts, boys, so they won't bolt when the trouble starts. And don't anybody get on a horse, because we're going to be shooting at everybody in a saddle. Scatter, and lie down flat."

CHAPTER 10

WELDON'S MEN WERE RUNNING now in the darkness, their shadows fading into the deeper black of the night. Weldon's nerves tightened up like the winding of a clock spring, and he was pounding the barrel of his pistol into his left hand when the thudding hoofbeats of Morehead's party became clearly audible.

Weldon saw that dark blobs of Morehead's men bearing down upon him. He heard Morehead's sharp shout, "Hold it," and the sliding halt of their animals.

Weldon had dropped to a squatting position so his body would not make a mark against the horizon as the Morehead men and horses did, and it was because Morehead could not see Weldon's people that he cautiously pulled up his men, fearing a trap.

"Weldon," Morehead called out from a distance of a hundred feet or so, "step up here."

Weldon answered softly without moving, "What's on your mind, Dallas?"

"You've taken cattle off my range against my orders. I told you not to do that, but I'll be reasonable. I want to look over the stuff to see that you haven't anything of mine in it."

"Drop around tomorrow after daylight and have a look," Weldon said. "You couldn't see anything before moonrise anyway."

"I'm not waiting till morning," Morehead answered. "You

could have anything of mine all the way up in the mountains by then. I'll take my look now, or know the reason why. You know the rules of this range."

"You changed rules yourself, Dallas. We had a right to take our stuff, but you changed the rules when you said we couldn't do it. Now you'll have to abide by the change. Drop around tomorrow—by yourself and in daylight, and I'll let you look over the herd."

"I'm going through those cattle now," Dallas Morehead shouted with mounting anger. "I've had enough of your troublemaking, Weldon, and I'm opening the gate on that cattle."

"You'd better have enough lead to back up that idea," Weldon answered, "because if you come another foot toward my gate, I'm going to open up on you."

Morehead's voice was raised to an angry shout. "Tear into them, men," he roared. "Ride 'em down. Let's go!"

The black mass of riders got their horses moving with shouts and curses, and with the trampling of their hooves. The bite of dust hit Weldon's nose as he thumbed back the hammer of his handgun. He was still squatting beside his rifle which lay on the ground in the dark. He levelled his pistol and sent a shot at the nearest black figure which was coming toward him. He heard the man scream, he saw the dark form disappear from the horse's back and hit the ground, and in the next moment the riderless horse thundered so close to Weldon that he had to roll over to escape the flying hooves.

Then in the darkness he heard Hap Durham give the wild-cat yell which always signalled the joy he got out of battle, and the next moment the whole prairie rocked with a fusillade of gunshots, and the muzzle flame from twenty or thirty guns was like a sudden descent of fireflies on a battlefield.

Somewhere in the darkness a couple of men let out piercing yells and emptied their guns at the horsemen who were bearing down on them. Weldon fired deliberately from a kneeling position, then hustled away to a new position. A horseman bore down on him. He stepped aside and shot the man out of the saddle just as he fired his half-aimed gun. The man's foot

caught in the stirrup as he fell; his horse snorted and dashed off dragging the screaming man head down across the ground. The man's cries died with him. Somewhere off in the blackness another horse screeched and fell, and threshed its frantic rider to death with his hooves.

The darkness added to the tension and the excitement, and men took fearful chances, popping up in front of horsemen, having guns explode in their faces, risking trampling hooves and whistling lead. Weldon's men fired at every horseman, at every sound, changed positions and fired again, while Morehead and his men rode headlong through them, turned and came back through them again and again.

And in the confusion, Weldon, following out his own advice, assumed that every horseman was a Morehead man and emptied his guns systematically at the moving riders who came in through the darkness, melted away and returned, threading back and forth through the scattered defenders in the darkness. There was no shelter except the night itself.

Weldon's nostrils were bit with the sharpness of gunsmoke, his ears were roaring with reverberations of the sound of battle, and he was fighting mechanically through a period that seemed to have no beginning and no prospect of ending. He had heard horses scream and fall, he had heard the cries of men who were hit, but this made only a confused picture to him, a picture painted in sound and smell and the flashing of the muzzle light from guns. He did not know how the battle was going, and he had no way of knowing.

And then suddenly there was a lull; the horses, having passed through the scattered defenders, did not turn and come back at the expected interval. And as those tense moments of waiting piled up, the silence became heavy with expectancy. Weldon stood in the darkness with his rifle cradled in his arm and his pistol in his hand, and he listened, trying to judge the shape of things.

He heard Morehead's voice rising into a shout at somebody, urging them to return and charge again, and he heard a snarling, incisive voice answer him. "You can go to hell,

Morehead. I ain't going up against an acre of hidden guns. I want to see what I'm fighting. Come on, boys, I'm gettin' out of this. Goin' with me?"

There was some more talk that Weldon could not make out, and then he heard a sudden movement of the horses, and the sounds grew thinner, fading quickly. Morehead's men had had their fill, and they were running out on him. There was no sound to indicate whether Morehead had ridden away with them.

Weldon waited until the sounds of the retreating men had died in the distance, and then he gave his attention to the little noises about him. A horse was thrashing about somewhere in the darkness. A man groaned and another grunted.

Weldon sensed that this was the end of the fight, the let-down after the tension. Morehead had not been able to drive his mountain men to keep on facing the fire coming from the shadowy moving forms of the ranchers. Morehead had failed in his first attempt to wipe the little ranchers out wholesale, but Weldon knew that he was not through.

A match flared here and there, and there were low voices about the several hundred square yards around the meadow gate. Hap Durham called out—and there was none of his eternal banter in his tone, "Hey, Jim. Mack's hit."

Weldon went over to where Hap was down on his knees, trying to lift Mack Rennison into a sitting position. Mack was cursing him in a blue streak. "Damn it, Hap, you're killing me!"

"Where'd they hit you?" Weldon asked, squatting down beside him.

"In the side," Rennison answered. "Busted a rib, it feels like. Give me that cigarette you're smoking, will you, Jim?"

"Better not smoke. Might be something hit your lungs," Hap said with concern. "Taste anything salty in your mouth—like blood?"

Rennison swore at Hap. "No, you damned hungry buzzard, it didn't hit my lungs. Just busted a rib or something. You're going to have to wait a while to sing tenor at my funeral.

Help me up on my feet, will you? And how's everybody else?"

Duke Forrest came up, and there was something peculiar about his voice, like he was having trouble getting the words out. "Brandlies and Turley. I—found them both—" His words trailed off.

"Both of 'em?" Weldon asked.

"Yes. They died together. Just like they always were."

Brandlies and Turley had been more than business partners in their little ranch; they had been inseparable companions since their fathers had brought them to this valley in the early years, and at the deaths of their parents they had thrown the two ranches together into one operation. They had seldom been seen apart, and no man had ever heard a cross word spoken between them. Two quiet, steady boys, hard workers, good neighbors. . . .

The news dropped a blanket of silence on the men; the sudden realization that they were now face to face with the realities of this thing stunned them for the time, and they went tight lipped about getting their horses and helping Renison on to his animal.

They went around the field covered by the battle, and came upon five dead mountain men and another one who had been shot through the shoulder and was walking away in the darkness. Duke Forrest stopped him and called Weldon, who joined them.

"What should we do with him?" Forrest asked.

The man's voice was like the snarl of a wounded animal. "Ain't you done enough?" he asked. "My right arm ain't no good no more. I might be bleeding to death."

"It won't be too big a loss to the country if your gun-hand is out of commission for keeps," Weldon answered dryly.

"You oughtn't to hold this business against me," the man argued. "I ain't got nothing against you. You can't blame a man for trying to make a few dollars, can you?"

Forrest said, "What can you do with a man like that?"

"I don't know," Weldon answered. "He turned his gun on

us. I kind of hate to shoot him down right here. But we can't afford to be holding any prisoners."

The man from the mountains was suffering the pain and exhaustion of battle, and knowing his own kind, he judged Weldon to be the same. Thus he expected to be shot down in cold blood. He had too much taken out of him in this fight to offer any stiffness, and he broke without further pressure.

"Look," he whined. "Give a man a chance. I'm through fighting for a man that will ride off and leave his men lying around wounded. Let me out of this, and I'll tell you something worth your while."

"I'm making no promises," Weldon snapped, "but say your say, and if it's worth anything, I'll think it over."

"All right. Morehead told us to come down and gather cattle off his range, everything that didn't have his brand on it. We was to have the cattle free, but then after you showed up today, he offered us five dollars a day and keep to do his fighting for him. We was to drive all your stock up to a place he just bought in a hideout valley up in the mountains. It's located right at the head of the creek that runs through Wildcat. We was to hold the cattle there, and sell 'em out from there."

"All right, you can go," Weldon said, "But if I catch you in this business again, I'll shoot you on sight."

As Weldon's group got under way after loading Brandlies' and Turley's bodies on their saddles, there was only one man who spoke.

Hap Durham said, "Damn Dallas Morehead to hell, anyway!"

It hit them too hard, this cold fact of the meaning of war, for any of them to be able to phrase their thoughts, or to make any rational statement. It was a thing of pure bitter emotion, an experience that words could not soften.

They rode toward Weldon's ranchhouse in a grim, silent procession, each man lost in his own contemplation of the things to come.

CHAPTER 11

REACHING THE POINT where they left the creek bottom and took the trail toward Weldon's quarters half a mile farther on, there was a stir and a murmur of voices in the group. They had seen dim lights burning in the direction of his house.

"Company," Ed Hay said. "More trouble, you reckon?"

Weldon's nerves tightened as he saw that there were indeed lights in his house. This puzzled him, for there was nobody he knew of who would have gone into his place and taken it upon himself to light his lamps. He and his few men had batched in the big house ever since the death of Weldon's father five years before they did their own work, had no cook, and had left nobody on the ranch when they had left this morning.

He did not like the sign; he and the rest of these men had been in the saddle all day, and had gone through a tough battle. They were tired and troubled, and they were not fit to go through much more trouble now as they came in with two of their friends dead and one wounded.

Ed Hay asked, "Wonder who that could be?"

"I don't know," Weldon said. "Morehead wouldn't go in and light the lamp to wait for us."

They reached the ranch quarters in a tense and touchy condition, grouped close together and with nerves on edge. Weldon rode on ahead, and Durham and Forrest pulled up alongside and joined him, and thus while the rest of the men came along with Rennison and the bodies of Brandlies and Turley, Weldon rode up toward the open back door of his place.

As the sound of the horses became audible, a girl's form filled the lighted open door. And then she stepped out and approached the three riders who pulled up cautiously. The girl came on, and called, "Mr. Weldon?"

Weldon, not recognizing her nor the voice in the darkness, answered, "Yes."

There was relief in the girl's voice. "Oh, I'm so glad you

got back. I'm Kate Heddon, Rank Heddon's daughter. I came over to take care of Mr. Lockridge."

Puzzled, Weldon said, "Your dad will be along in a minute. What's the matter with Mr. Lockridge?"

"He's shot," the girl said. "Mr. Morehead's men shot him when they burned his house down. My brother passed his place on his way here this morning, and he found him shot, and brought him here in a wagon. You didn't mind us bringing him here, did you? There was nowhere else to take him."

"Of course not," Weldon answered. "Well, I'll see him in a minute. We've got a wounded man of our own to take care of." He turned to Durham. "Hap, would you ride to town and get the doctor?"

The girl spoke up. "He won't have to go. The doctor is already here. My brother Bob went and got him."

"That's fine," Weldon answered as the remaining horsemen rode up. "We can sure use him right now."

"I'll cook you something if you want me to," the girl volunteered. "We've already cooked some of your food. Doctor Norton said it would be all right with you."

"We could sure stand something to eat," Weldon told her, and then turned to helping the boys get Rennison and the two bodies off the horses.

They got Mack Rennison into one of the beds in the big side room, and they brought the two bodies and put them side by side in another bed. Doctor Norton was a wiry little man with a white goatee and short, nervous gestures. He was only now getting through taking care of the wound in Lockridge's leg. Lockridge was in Weldon's bed, his heavy body limp and his tanned face grey. He had gone through a lot of pain before the doctor got there to relieve him, and he had gone through still more inner anguish.

Doctor Norton finished up with Lockridge and came over and tore Rennison's bloody shirt off and examined the wound in his side. He probed with small sharp fingers, and Rennison let out a grunt.

The doctor snorted. "Don't tell me a little thing like my

finger hurts you." He probed another moment and then beamed professionally, "Well, there ought to be a rib at that spot, but there ain't. It must be hiding somewhere deeper in your innards. We'll just polish up the wound a bit, and then get a pair of fence stretchers and yank that rib back into place and hold it there with adhesive tape. Snapped off right at the backbone."

Weldon stopped over by the doctor and asked, "Is Lockridge in condition to do some talking?"

"Sure," the doctor answered, "the bullet didn't hit him in the mouth, it hit his leg."

Thus the little doctor, recognizing that the whole group was under a strong tension, did his best by his cheery manner to keep a heavy blanket of gloom from smothering them all. Weldon, at first resenting his apparent superficiality under the trying conditions, gradually understood the meaning of his efforts and appreciated them. He went over and pulled a chair up beside the bed of the blacksmith, Henry Lockridge.

"Feeling all right?" he inquired. He did not know Lockridge well, since the men who had come in and started farming had steered clear of the ranchers, sensing from the beginning that they were not welcome on the Pushmoline.

Lockridge studied him suspiciously, as though to search first for any hidden danger in Weldon before answering. Then his answer was no more than a politeness. "Yes, thanks. And I appreciate your letting me be brought here." And then, since young Heddon had actually brought him here without Weldon's permission, he added. "I'm sorry to put you out. I'll be going as soon as I can make arrangements."

"Now listen here," Weldon said quickly. "There's nobody occupying this house except me and my boys, and we're out most of the time. You just stay put as long as you like. I hear that Morehead burned you out."

"Yes," Lockridge answered bitterly. "His foreman did it this morning. Took my girl away, too."

Weldon felt a tug of great concern, much more, he noted, than he would have felt had it been anybody else. He had

not had time to think of the girl during the day, but now he realized that his interest in her was something special.

"You mean he abducted her?"

"It amounts to the same thing," Lockridge answered. "But he knew he couldn't just drag her off without her putting up a pretty good fight. She's a spunky girl. Duffy had already shot me, and when June refused to go with his man Freeman up into the mountains, he threatened to kill me if she didn't go peaceful. It was a smart trick. If he had threatened to kill her if she didn't go, he'd probably have had to kill her. But she went rather than see him kill me. I think I hate him more for using that trick than if he'd killed her dead."

"I know," Weldon answered. "But we can't let her stay up in those hills until you are able to go look for her. I'll go see if I can find her."

"I'm putting you out enough already," Lockridge answered. "This is my trouble, and it ain't right for a stranger to expect you to put yourself out that much. Especially when you've got your own fight on your hands."

"Most of us around here are neighbors," Weldon answered. "And we try to be neighborly. There'll be men left around here to do the fighting, and in the meantime, there's nobody else to get your daughter. I'll get going as soon as I eat and get ready."

Weldon went into the kitchen where the Heddon girl was now taking a pan of hot biscuits out of the oven, and the boy was emptying a pan of frying steaks into a platter already piled half full. The smell of the boiling coffee reminded him that he hadn't eaten since breakfast, but he shoved the thought aside.

"Where's your father?" he asked the boy.

"He lit out last night," the boy answered. "I don't know where he went."

"I mean—didn't he come in with the rest of the boys?"

"No, I didn't see him."

Weldon went to the back of the house where the riders were washing their faces at a bench by the well. "What hap-

pened to Heddon?" he asked. "I don't remember seeing him since I was talking to him before the fight. Anybody see him?"

"He was right close to me during part of the fight," answered Hick Tower, Forrest's man. "I heard him a-cussing Morehead and blazing away at them men. He was having him a time of it, trying to kill 'em all himself, personal. I ain't seen him since. And we didn't find his body, so he ain't dead."

Nobody else had seen him, and it became certain that he had not ridden in with them.

"That's funny," Tower said. "I heard him tell you he wanted to come with us and get something to eat. I thought at the time that a man must be mighty hungry to be willing to fight his way through them mountain rannies just to get a meal."

Weldon went back toward the house, his hand in his pants pocket, his fingers jiggling two empty rifle shells, his mind adding up the few scraps of information about Heddon. He stopped in the kitchen, where the girl and boy were putting the dishes and food on the long table in the middle of the room.

"Kate," he said. "I'd consider it a favor to me if you could stay here and kind of help around the house for a while. With two men bunged up, and the rest of us busy, it would be a great help if you didn't mind doing it. Bob, after supper, would you like to go and get your mother in my buggy and bring her over? She'd be a great help, and then you needn't tell her this, but the fact is, it might be safer. There's no use kidding ourselves, there's going to be trouble around here."

The boy was a sober youth, and his face gave the impression that he had always lived under a weight heavier than a boy should be called on to bear. Some of the worry left his face at Weldon's proposal, and his smile was more one of gratitude than of anything else. "Yes," he answered. "I think I can get her to come."

Weldon went again into the big bedroom where Mack Renison lay on his bunk stripped to the waist, and his right side covered from his breastbone to his back with white adhesive

strips laid on like shingles from under his armpit down almost to his hip. The doctor had finished with him, and Forrest and Durham were sitting by his bed, though none of them had much to say.

Ed Hay came up and squatted on his heel. "What I don't understand," he said, "is how all this happened so suddenly. I kind of pictured it building up slow, but here before you hardly know there's trouble, we're in it up to our necks. It beats me."

"It doesn't beat me," Weldon answered.

He took the two brass rifle shells out of his pocket. He placed them side by side and held them under the lamp, so that the light shone down on the indented percussion caps. Both caps had been punctured by the rifle's firing pin.

"What do you make of them?" he asked, and handed the two shells to Hay.

Hay took them in his hand, held them under the light and examined them, with Forrest and Durham looking over his shoulder.

"Fired from the same rifle, of course," Ed Hay observed. "Looks like the gun had a home-made firing pin that was made a trifle too long, so it went right through them caps."

"Yeah," Hap Durham added. "And by the shape of the hole in the caps, the point of the pin was a little off center and kind of flat on one side, like a man had shaped it up with a file. But what does that tell you? All of us must have fired several boxes of rifle shells during that ruckus. Where'd you get them?"

"Two different places," Weldon answered. "One of the shells I picked up by those dead cows this morning. The man that shot 'em didn't stop to pick up the shells that he ejected from his rifle every time he reloaded."

Ed Hay looked at Weldon with lifted eyebrows. "I see," he said. "And you picked up the other one at the meadow gate."

Weldon nodded.

"So somebody there in that fight shot those cows."

"Looks like it," Weldon admitted.

Hap started to say something eagerly, then bit his words off.

"I thought that would pin it on the man that did it. But hell, Jim, there was more than twenty of us in that fight."

Weldon called toward the kitchen. "Bob, would you come here a minute?"

The Heddon boy came to the door and said, "Yes, sir?"

"Bob," Weldon asked. "Do you suppose your dad could make a new firing pin for a Winchester?"

"Sure, he could," the youth answered. "He just made one for his own gun not more than a month ago. And it shoots as good as ever."

"Thanks," Weldon answered, and the youth went back to the kitchen.

Hap Durham blew out his breath; Ed Hay and Rennison and Duke Forrest did not speak. Then Hap asked, "How'd you know it was him, Jim?" -

"Remember when Heddon shot that man behind the rise before the fight started? The other one of those shells is the one he ejected from his rifle then. I picked it up almost as soon as it hit the ground."

They were silent for a moment. Then Hap looked over at the forms of his two dead friends covered with sheets on one of the beds. "But why? Why would he do a thing like that?"

"I think," Weldon opined slowly, "that we've misjudged Heddon. He has plenty of reason to hate Morehead's guts, and you can't blame him for wanting to see Morehead killed. But he fooled me; I didn't think he had the gumption or the energy to think up the idea of killing our stock in order to make us put the blame on Morehead and go after him for it. That took more figuring than I gave Heddon credit for being able to do, but it almost worked. We almost took the battle to Morehead on his own ground this morning. Don't forget that. Every one of us wanted to kill him."

"Well, I'll be damned," Hap exploded. "Heddon! Who'd have thought he had sense enough to throw his battle in our laps and make us fight it for him?"

"He knew we were fighting Morehead," Hay offered. "So he just recruited us, brought the battle about, joined it for a

while and walked out when it was over. I feel like I've been made a fool of by a man I thought was a fool."

"It's not that bad," Weldon said, summing it up. "We were going to have to fight anyway, and Heddon's stunt probably threw Morehead off balance, because it didn't work out the way he had planned it. And Heddon did keep us from walking into Morehead's trap at the ford. It may be that it was better that way."

The girl came in and called them to supper.

CHAPTER 12

WHEN THE MOUNTAIN MEN refused to charge Weldon's party for the last time at the meadow, and started riding away, Dallas Morehead was fuming with rage at them. But he knew that he could no longer control them in the face of Weldon's devastating fire, and so accepted his temporary setback. And because he calculated that they might still be of further use to him at a later date, he did not show them his anger. Instead, he rode along with them toward the crossroads.

When they reached the rise along which the road ran, it was Duffy who shouted, "Hey, what's that light?"

"Fire!" Pancho Malone answered.

They all pulled their horses to a stop and looked ahead toward the Morehead quarters a good three miles ahead. And a small blaze of flickering light was clearly visible to them, too large for a lighted window, but not large enough yet to cast its glow against the sky. There could be no question that it was one of Morehead's buildings ablaze.

Morehead was silent a long moment while the knowledge of this sank into him, then he barked an order. "Come on!" They all whipped their animals up into a lope.

As they rode, the size of the fire increased, and by the time they had covered the distance to the ranch, one of Morehead's big hay barns was a roaring pile of fire, sending its sparks high into the air and pouring out great clouds of billowing black smoke. The fire crackled like a giant frying steak; the red glow

lit up the house and the other outbuildings and the panicky horses in the nearby corral.

The barn was half eaten away by flame now, and there was no possible way to save it. The horsemen pulled to a stop a safe distance away and sat on their weary animals, gazing mutely into the blaze, each with his own wonderment and his own answer as to how it caught. And thus they stood around and did nothing until the barn was reduced to a heap of glowing embers.

Morehead had been queerly silent all during the time, and finally Duffy turned to him and spoke:

"I wonder what's the answer to that?"

"The answer to that," Morehead snapped, "is the same as the answer to those dead cows Weldon came over here squawking about this morning, and the answer to how he avoided our trap at the creek. The answer is Heddon!"

"Heddon!" Duffy repeated, and there was a touch of bewilderment in his voice. He was silent a moment, and then said, "I don't see it. Just a damned worthless nester that hasn't got gumption enough to hustle his own food. That don't add up to me. It takes more than Heddon's got. Maybe Weldon—"

"Don't fool yourself," Morehead said shortly. "You can take one of those worthless kind sometimes and ride him so hard that he'll turn on you. Heddon would have been buried by now, except for Weldon, and he knows it. And he knows further that we'll find him and finish the job. So he's just going to keep on sniping at us and making us trouble from now till the day we get rid of him."

"You've got no proof it's him. What about Weldon? Him and them friends of his think you killed their stock. Why couldn't it have been them?"

"You just don't know men," Morehead answered. "We're after Weldon and his bunch, and we'll get them, but they're just not barn-burners. They'll fight you, but they'll come up to your face to do it. Heddon's different; he's a little man with a little mind, and he's afraid to come out in the open and do his fighting. No, Duffy, it's not Weldon's bunch. It's Heddon,

and we can't have him around in the dark sniping at us. He's got to be taken care of as quick as possible."

Duffy had been spending as much time as possible during the day trying to think of an excuse to get up into Wildcat, where he had sent Freeman with June Lockridge. Now he saw his chance, and was quick to grab it, at the same time showing Morehead how loyal he was.

"Well," he said with studied thoughtfulness, "I guess you're right about that. I was kind of tired, but like you say, the quicker Heddon is out of our hair, the quicker we don't have to worry about what he does or says. I'll hit up into the mountains right now, so's not to give him too much of a start. He'll probably go to Wildcat to get supplies."

Not knowing about Duffy's having abducted and sent the girl up to Wildcat, Morehead was pleased at his foreman's willingness to start right out. "That'll be fine," he said, "and when I know Heddon is safe, it will be worth something extra to me. Go on as soon as you're ready."

"I'll get going as soon as I get a bite to eat and catch up a new horse," Duffy said eagerly.

Morehead turned and started toward his house. The mountain men had been standing off in a group by themselves, talking in low voices, and when Morehead started away, the man named Josh separated from the group and caught up with him.

"One little thing," he said. "You promised the boys five dollars apiece for this evening's work. We'll just take our pay and mosey on."

Morehead turned angrily, then caught himself before he could express his impatience.

"All right," he answered. "I'll go to the house and get it and bring it out to you." He headed for the back door, catching up with Duffy.

Back with his own group, Josh said, "Five dollars ain't much for what we done. I hate to head back empty-handed."

"Just what did you have in mind?" one of the men asked.

"I was thinking of them cows Weldon and his friends has

got penned up in that little meadow. All bunched up waiting for us and everything."

"And I am thinking of all them bullets them ranchers was throwing around so careless a little while ago," one of the men complained.

"You can forget that," Josh said. "They was dog-tired, and you can gamble that all our own lead wasn't wasted. So they probably picked up their marbles and headed for home to lick their wounds. Anyhow, we can take a little ride over that way and see. If they've left a guard out, we'll come back and take some of Morehead's stock. I don't like to waste a good dark night like this without trying to pick up a little change."

"What about the boys we left there? Think we ought to take their bodies up to Wildcat and bury 'em?"

"Weldon's gang killed 'em, didn't they? Let Weldon bury 'em!"

After a while Morehead came out and paid them off. Josh said, "You forgot some of us, didn't you?"

"No," Morehead answered. "You've all got your money."

"There's five of us that didn't live to collect," John answered. "I'll just take their wages and divide it between the rest of us. I hired out twelve men to you, and I want pay for twelve men. The rest of them did their work before they died, so I reckon they earned theirs. That'll be another twenty-five dollars."

Morehead snorted his disgust and paid off, and the men left. Duffy, in the ranch kitchen, finished a supper of cold beef and coffee in a hurry, already relishing his trip to see the girl Freeman was holding for him. Then he went out and saddled his horse. Morehead followed along, apparently at a loss as to what to do at the moment.

"Anything you want?" Duffy asked. "Junior and Pancho will stay around, if you've got anything on your mind."

"No," Morehead answered. "I'm going to be busy tonight. Weldon and Heddon have thrown me clear off balance a little, cracking this fight wide open before I was completely ready for it. I've got to go over things and change my plans."

"I didn't think that scarecrow had it in him," Duffy said, again expressing his surprise at Heddon's actions.

"You can't tell what's in a man until you corner him and see what comes out," Morehead answered. "Heddon has turned out to be more of a problem than I expected. It won't do to have him around."

"Leave him to me," Duffy answered. "I might be gone a day or two, but I think I can fix things up fine."

"Just don't underestimate him again," Morehead warned, and started for his house, his head bowed in thought. He was making new plans already.

It was after midnight when Jim Weldon got away from his place. He had a fresh horse and he set out in the new moonlight.

He had loved these summer nights, but now he rode with a feeling of both sadness and anger.

There was no law around here to stop him. Marshal Bradford's bailiwick was bounded by the town limits, and the territorial government was a hundred miles away, and was no more than a token of Federal Authority at best, with no local law enforcement agencies of any kind.

This was a self-sufficient country, where men had to settle their own differences, where they lived their lives according to their own light. It was a land where men had to fight for their rights, for the things they believed in, and they would fight, whether their convictions were right or wrong.

And so that was the way it was with Weldon. By virtue of common consent and recognition of his qualities, he had gradually grown into the position of leadership among the ranchers here. The one man who did not recognize his leadership was Dallas Morehead.

Weldon reached the foot of the mountains and without halt plunged into a deer trail that led twisting and winding upward. He knew this country, every foot of it, and the maze of streams and trails, the small mountain meadows and lakes and the

barren slides were as familiar to him even in the night as was his own back pasture.

Thus as he entered the darkness of the wooded mountain-side from the moonlit prairie, he did not have to stop to orient himself, but followed one trail after another upward, cutting through the small mountain benches, stopping here and again at a creek, crossing gullies, following other dry ones upward only to leave them at the crossing of a deer trail, but always continuing to climb in the most direct possible route toward Wildcat.

He passed into the shadows of forests of post oak and elm and blackjack, came out for brief spells into the moonlight and then was quickly swallowed up again. He crossed a creek a hundred or so yards below a waterfall, and came out upon a bench high up in the hills a little before daylight at a time when the moon was just beginning to dip behind some of the peaks, throwing an almost impenetrable blackness over the forested mountain valley before him. He was within less than a mile of Wildcat now, and there would be little that he could do there at a time like this. He pulled off the trail, unsaddled his horse and tied him to a sapling in a bunch of grass, and lay down to catch a wink of sleep.

At daylight he was in the saddle again and riding into Wildcat, first having stopped at the edge of the woods to survey its lone street. Resting on a flat bench just below a passable gap in the mountain ridge, Wildcat had originally been nothing but a lone general store for the convenience of passing trappers and homesteaders, and then from time to time somebody had built himself a cabin near the store, until there were perhaps a dozen small shelters of boards and logs in the surrounding area. The store was run by a man aptly called Grizzly.

Nobody knew Grizzly's name nor where he came from, nor did they care. Now most of his trade came from the wild bunch who kept to the hills for safety from the law and private enemies. The hills were wild, and nobody knew how many men were hiding around in them. The inhabitants got their supplies and their liquor from Grizzly, and occasionally slept

in one of the few rooms he had on the second floor of his place. Although Grizzly was not a crook now, if he ever had been, he did business with the mountain men, and he respected their secrets, and they in turn trusted him. He was a neutral, and he was an expert at keeping his mouth shut, a necessary virtue in his position.

Weldon rode up to the store, tied his animal outside and went in. The place was gloomy, its shelves half crammed with the infinite variety of odds and ends found in a country store, and with a smell distinctly its own. Up near the front, in a corner, a huge man sat at a pine table stirring a tin cup of coffee with a spoon and reading a copy of *Leslie's Weekly* so old that the pink cover was faded to a hen-egg tan.

"Getting your education early," Weldon remarked to him. "Paper say anything exciting happened yesterday?"

Grizzly tapped the last drop of coffee off the spoon on the edge of the cup and looked up, his eyes deep in the heavy flesh of his face. He wiped his enormous moustache back away from his mouth with a puffy hand, as though to get it out of the way of his words.

"They had a bad blizzard back in New York," he answered. "But this paper is six months old, so I reckon the snow has melted by now. Coffee on the stove."

Weldon had known Grizzly for a long time, and they got along all right. But he knew that there was no use in asking Grizzly a direct question. Grizzly knew everything and told nothing. Weldon poured a cup of coffee for himself, dumped some milk into it from a can, and stirred it with Grizzly's spoon. He was figuring how to get the information he wanted.

"Grizzly," he said, "you're getting fat. You must not have enough trade to keep you in trim."

"All the trade I want," Grizzly returned idly, turning a page of the magazine. "They keep me busy enough."

"Not half as busy as if your customers were women. They like lots of attention."

Grizzly's eyes turned to Weldon for a brief moment, and

Weldon could not read them. Then he gave his attention back to his magazine. "I wouldn't know," he said.

Weldon thought this over. Knowing Grizzly, he suspected that if his remark hadn't meant anything, Grizzly would have come forth with one of his usual contemptuous opinions of womankind in general. That was one subject on which he would ordinarily express his views freely and with considerable emphasis.

Drinking his coffee, Weldon concluded that there was a strong possibility that the girl was being held here. But getting Grizzly to admit it would be next to impossible, and enlisting his help would be clearly out of the question.

He had not made up his mind as to his next move when he heard the sound of a horse approaching. Grizzly must have heard it too, but gave no sign to that effect.

"This town is growing up mighty fast," Weldon observed. "Getting crowded."

"I've seen the time when two men was a crowd," Grizzly answered. "A mighty big crowd."

The rider had stopped in front of the store, and now he opened the door and stepped inside. He pulled the door closed behind him and stood in the gloom of the store while his eyes focussed to the diminished light.

"Yes, sir, a mighty big crowd," Grizzly repeated, and kept on reading his paper.

It was Coke Duffy filling the entrance of the store.

CHAPTER 13

WELDON PUT HIS GAZE ON DUFFY and knew at once why he was here; Duffy had come to see the girl he had sent on before him. It was written on Duffy's face, it was apparent in the surprise that he registered as his eyes got accustomed to the gloom of the place and he recognized Weldon leaning against the wall by the table.

"Little early in the morning to go sparking, Duffy," Weldon said, and watched the reaction on Duffy's face.

Caught off balance, and not being a man who thought swiftly, Duffy failed to hide the fact that Weldon's probing statement had caught him flat-footed. His face turned red with anger, and for a moment he said nothing, indicating his confusion.

Weldon pulled out his makings and began rolling a cigarette, a gesture of indifference which further infuriated Duffy. He licked the paper, stuck the cigarette in his mouth and struck a match, taking his time about lighting the cigarette.

Then Weldon added, "What's the matter, Duffy? Can't you get a woman for yourself except by dragging her off to a cave by the hair of her head?"

The lines on Duffy's face tightened now as his mounting rage at this goading turned the focus of his attention from his predicament to his own hatred of Weldon.

"Are you begging for trouble with me?" he asked.

Weldon laughed coldly. "I've already had trouble with you, Duffy. I notice you didn't ride in my direction last night while the lead was flying."

"If I had seen you last night, you wouldn't have been here today," Duffy answered.

"But I am here today," Weldon answered. "And I'm here on the same business you are—the girl. Is that all right with you?"

Duffy's big right hand hovered over the handle of his pistol, the fingers clenching again and again, as though his hand were a separate thing from his body, and wanted to get into action on its own. But Duffy's calculating mind was working its slow way through his problem. He had a gun on him, and he had the urge to kill. But Weldon also had a gun on him, and Weldon was a faster man on the draw; Weldon had proved his ability in the face of a weapon, and Duffy had not.

And there was a still deeper thing that held him back; it was the unconscious memory of the meeting with Weldon in the dark, when Weldon had dared him to come through him, and he had backed down. That had done something to Duffy, and now because of it, he was afraid to draw his gun on Weldon. And so while Weldon practically insulted him by holding

his cigarette in his gun hand, thus handicapping himself, Duffy felt and knew that he could not reach down and lift his own weapon out of his holster.

And yet Duffy was not a man who could bear to have a man face him or to cross him. He felt the tension build up around him and the man who had faced him down before his men, and he knew that he had to wipe that out.

"Weldon," he said, "you've been riding mighty high in your stirrups lately. And you've been pushing against me too hard. I've got enough of it."

"That's all right with me," Weldon answered. "Just name your poison and start dishing it out."

"You're a mighty handy man with a gun," Duffy answered, "but take your weapon out of your hand and there wouldn't be much to you. I've always thought that, and I think it now."

"And so you're going to do something about it. Is that it?"

"I am for a fact," Duffy answered. He had figured out his play and now he had made it. He reached down to his waist and started unbuckling his belt. "I'm going to see just what makes the wheels go round in you. I'm going to tear you apart and see just what it is inside you that makes you move and act like a man."

He had his holstered gun off, and he walked across the room and threw the weapon on the counter. "Now," he said, turning and facing Weldon, "get your gun off and let's see whether it's your Colt or yourself that you're so proud of."

It was a canny move on Duffy's part, which would throw the balance in his favor, for Duffy outweighed Weldon by sixty or seventy pounds. He was a fighter of the rough and tumble school, knowing no ethics and almost completely insensitive to pain. All bone and muscle and without scruples, he was as deadly as a vicious brown bear, and he had all the fighting instincts of a wild animal.

Weldon had goaded him to a fury, but he was too smart to fight Weldon with a gun. Instead, he had turned the tables on Weldon, and now stood before him, his legs spread apart, breathing heavily through his thick nose, knowing instinctively

that Weldon would not shoot him down unarmed, and that he now had Weldon where he had to take off his own gun and face him with fists, or back down in the presence of Grizzly.

"Duffy," Weldon said, unbuckling his gunbelt, "I can whip anybody that has to prove he's a man by burning down an old nester's house and stealing his girl. You are no man at all; you can't even think for yourself. You're just the big right arm that does the dirty work that Morehead thinks up but is not quite filthy enough to do for himself. Without his brains to think for you, you'd be out grazing on his range like the rest of his cattle. If you think you're a man, come on and show me."

As Weldon had intended, his words drove Duffy to a blind fury, and the big man's eyes lost their look of reason, shining more like the malignant eyes of a springing mountain lion as he threw himself toward Weldon. It was a rush of blind, exultant fury. He had tricked Weldon into disarming himself, and thus had gained all the advantage he needed to destroy him.

Weldon waited his coming, well knowing the odds, knowing that had the positions been reversed Duffy would have shot him dead, and knowing, too, that Duffy had the advantage in his unethical tactics and in his size and build.

Just as Duffy came upon him, Weldon brushed the man's slugging arm upward and sidestepped, sending a blow crashing to his ear as Duffy went on past him.

The blow gave momentum to Duffy's moving body, but it did something to Weldon, too. It told him why he had nagged Duffy into this fight; it told him that he had particularly wanted to punish the man on account of the girl. The thought came as a surprise to him, but it also gave him an added urge to get his hands on the big man.

Duffy caught himself by digging his boots into the floor like a horse pulled to a sudden stop. Then he turned, lowering his head like a charging bull, and ran at Weldon again. Weldon had quickly shifted positions now, and met him out in the open space between the front door and the saddle rack. Duffy

hit him in the chest with his lowered head, driving forward like a bull with his eyes closed. The weight of his charge slammed Weldon back against the saddle rack, knocking it over.

Weldon fell in the tangle of saddles, and having caught Duffy's vest in his hands, pulled the man down with him. Duffy fell on top of him with all his weight, and as Weldon landed on his back he brought his knee up into Duffy's belly and Duffy's fall on it knocked some of the wind out of him. Duffy scrambled to free himself from the tangle of a saddle, and while he was at it, Weldon rolled over and got to his feet.

Duffy got untangled, rolled over on to his hands and knees and then got to his feet. He came at Weldon again. Duffy lowered his head as he had done before, but just as he reached Weldon he stopped short and lifted one foot and kicked Weldon in the stomach.

The wind went out of Weldon as he doubled over, and in that moment Duffy kicked again, the toe of his boot grazing Weldon's chin. The blow was a glancing one or it would have done more damage, but it laid open the skin of Weldon's jaw and knocked him down. And Duffy jumped on his prostrate body just as a boy jumps into the water, lifting his feet and landing with his full weight in a seated position on Weldon's chest, knocking the wind completely out of him.

Weldon's lungs were empty and paralyzed; he couldn't breathe, though his muscles were jerking spasmodically, trying desperately to pull air back into his tortured lungs. The room was going dark and there were bright lights bursting before his eyes. He had to get out of this quickly.

Lying on his back, he kicked upward with one foot and then another, aiming them at Duffy's head. Finally his boot toe came against Duffy's ear, knocking Duffy's head close enough to Weldon's reach for his fingers to get into his hair. He jerked Duffy's head down with one hand and sent his fist crashing into his nose with a series of short stinging blows that brought the blood spurting on them both. Duffy was groggy for a moment and closed his eyes and shook his head to clear his vision.

Weldon gave a sudden twist while Duffy's mind was on this, and unseated the man, rolling him over to the floor, and rolling his own body out of reach of Duffy's kicking boot toes. He staggered to his feet and backed against the meat counter as Duffy got up and rushed at him.

Weldon met his onrush with a driving blow which landed against Duffy's neck and halted the man, throwing his head back. Weldon stepped in and threw half a dozen quick punches to Duffy's ribs, driving the wind out of his lungs. Duffy's arms seemed to go heavy and they dropped to his sides momentarily. Weldon sent his next blows to the man's face. A hard clip to the mouth pulped Duffy's lips against his teeth and started the blood flowing down his chin.

Duffy's face went grey and he swayed drunkenly, and Weldon, raging at the brutality of the man and all he stood for, waded in to finish him off quickly.

Duffy had the strength of a bull, and his instinct guided his actions. He reached out and caught Weldon around the waist, pulling him in so close that Weldon could not get leverage behind his blows. And thus Duffy held Weldon while he regained his breath and cleared his head.

Weldon tried to struggle out of the bearlike grip, but Duffy had his own two hands locked together in the small of Weldon's back, and Weldon's efforts merely used up his own strength, making him weaker by the moment without at the same time effecting his release.

Desperately, he lifted his knee and drove it into Duffy's groin with all his remaining strength. Duffy grunted like a stuck hog and his arms released Weldon momentarily, and he sank back along the hardware counter.

They were both nearing the point of exhaustion, both staying on their feet through sheer will power. Weldon felt this weakness growing in him; his arms had the weight of lead, and his legs were numb with the weight of his body. But he saw the slowing down in Duffy, and he drove himself to continue the battle.

Duffy was no more than a blind automaton, a creature bent

on killing or being killed, and having no consciousness of the pain in him. He pushed himself away from the counter, but his forward progress was slower now, his legs spreading wider to support his body as he went toward Weldon.

Weldon braced his foot against a gun rack and as Duffy's weight came against him, he put both open hands against Duffy's chest and shoved stiffly and with a sudden employment of all his strength. Duffy went off balance, reeled forward and knocked the gun rack over, falling among the weapons which had dropped to the floor.

Duffy got up into a sitting position. His eyes were almost blank of expression now as he looked at the guns. Weldon could almost read the slow thought that came through his mind. Duffy put his hands against the floor, got to his hands and feet, and when he stood up he was holding a shotgun by the barrel. He spat on his hands one at a time like a man preparing to dig a hole with a pick, and then he hefted the gun, swinging it in his grip. Then he looked at Weldon, his torn and bleeding underlip hanging loosely open, showing his yellow teeth, his eyes glazed.

Weldon read Duffy's purpose on his face, and he looked around quickly for some defensive weapon. He reached out and picked up a hickory singletree, the only thing available within reach, and as he hefted it, Duffy started coming doggedly toward him with the shotgun held over his shoulder like a man carrying an axe.

Weldon backed away, swinging his own singletree, and thus Duffy followed him clear across the rear end of the store. Somewhere in the building around him he heard voices, but they were vague and far away, and he did not look for them, but kept out of reach of Duffy's weapon.

Then Weldon had his back against the drygoods counter, and could back no farther. Duffy grunted in satisfaction, and swung the gun in a great arc, aiming at Weldon's head. Weldon let his knees give way partly, dropping his body. Duffy's gun whistled over Weldon's head.

And then Weldon raised himself up. He went up on his tip-

toes as he swung the singletree. The hickory weapon caught Duffy a glancing blow on his skull which tore his ear halfway off. The sound of the blow was like that of an axe in a woodsman's hand.

Duffy's hands relaxed and the shotgun slid to the floor. Duffy's knees folded like the blade of a closing jackknife and he fell forward on the floor, landing on his face. His legs kicked spasmodically a few times, he rolled over on his side, and then on to his back, and lay thus while his breath came in great noisy gulps. Duffy was not dead, but he had all the fight taken out of him for the present.

Weldon dropped the singletree which seemed too heavy a burden to his aching arms. His ribs hurt as he tried to pump fresh air into his lungs, and his legs felt as weak as a limp rag. He eased himself down on to a nail keg and sat with his head in his hands, breathing deep, painful breaths.

Duffy was not even trying to get to his feet.

CHAPTER 14

IT WAS SEVERAL MOMENTS before Weldon began to be conscious of the silence around him, and to remember the voices that he had half-heard during the fight. He lifted his head out of his hands and looked around the store. It was a wreck. The saddle and harness racks were turned over, there were canned goods spilled out of shelves on the right, and on the left side of the place piles of overalls and jumpers and horse blankets had been jerked off the counter and were scattered on the floor. The place looked as if a cyclone had struck it.

Weldon's gaze finally came to rest on the vast bulk of old Grizzly, still sitting at his pine table in the right-hand front corner of the store. But Grizzly's hand did not hold his tin coffee cup; instead, it held a Winchester rifle which rested on the edge of the table, its barrel pointed up the open staircase at the left rear of the store. It was in a position so that it could quickly be shifted toward Duffy, who lay on the floor beside one of the two poker tables.

Grizzly's face was never known to register any emotion except when he was announcing his scorn of women. Now he looked back at Weldon and asked, "You finish the big so-and-so?"

"No," Weldon answered, getting to his feet painfully. "He'll live to hang, I reckon."

"Then you're negligent in your duty to your fellowman," Grizzly growled. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

"Who were you talking to?" Weldon asked, coming forward and pouring a fresh cup of coffee out of the pot. "Or is it any of my business?"

"It came pretty near being too much of your business," Grizzly answered. "That beanpole that works with Duffy—what's his name?—Freeman. He showed up at the head of the stairs and was getting set to take a shot at you. I had to persuade him to let you and Duffy handle your own affairs."

"I didn't hear you shoot."

"I didn't have time. He ducked back too quick, and I was afraid of hitting—uh—somebody else."

"The girl, you started to say."

"I didn't start to say nothing. If you're so curious about her, why don't you go and look in that second room from the head of the stairs?"

Weldon poured the scalding black coffee down his throat, and went to the washpan and washed the blood off his face, and combed his hair with Grizzly's comb. He buckled on his gun belt. Then he looked speculatively at Duffy, and Grizzly read his mind.

"I wouldn't worry about Duffy disturbing you. You won that girl fair and square, and I'll see that Duffy takes his loss."

"You're a cynical old bear," Weldon answered, and went up the stairs.

The door of the second room was half open, and when there was no answer to his knock, he shoved the door open wide. The room had been occupied, but it was empty now. He looked at the bed which had the appearance of someone having rested on it without turning the covers down. Near one

of the pillows, he found a woman's hairpin. He went out and searched the other rooms, and found them empty.

He turned and went back downstairs. "They've flown the coop," he said. "There's nobody up there now."

Grizzly rubbed his big moustache. "Well, now, that's my fault," he exclaimed. "I reckon I just got so interested in you and Duffy that Freeman probably took that gal down the outside backstairs and lit a shuck for some place else without me seeing them go."

"That's the disadvantage of having an outside stairway," Weldon complained.

"Well, sir, considering the citizenry around here, an outside stairway also has its advantages," Grizzly replied. "What you going to do now?"

"Look for them."

"These are mighty complicated mountains," Grizzly reminded him.

"And I know every bush on this side of them," Weldon answered.

"But you don't know who's hiding behind them bushes," Grizzly opined.

"I'll find out," Weldon answered. "Right now, I'm going out to do some tracking. You can charge half the damage to me, and I'll pay you when I see you."

"You don't owe me nothing. The fight was worth it. It took ten years off my life to see Duffy get his needings."

Weldon went out the front and got his horse and rode around to the rear of the store building, where he picked up the tracks of the man and the girl heading toward the pole corral. He read the story quickly; Freeman had apparently kept their horses saddled, and had got away with the girl. He followed their tracks into the woods, leading upward along a wide, beaten trail.

Then he became puzzled by the tracks of still another horse which had come out of the timber and was following them, the latter's hoofprints imposed upon those of Freeman's and

the girl's horses. He tried to figure this out as he rode, but he could not get an answer to it.

Following the well-beaten trail upward through the heavy growth of pine and blackjack, he later began to notice a peculiar thing about the tracks of one of the horses. At a distance of about every three or four hundred yards, the tracks became a jumble, as though the rider had pulled the horse up short and made him prance for a step or two.

Weldon gave this some attention as he rode, and when these peculiar tracks continued at the regular intervals, it became clear to him that one of the riders was deliberately prancing his animal at these points for the purpose of marking his trail.

But which rider was doing it? And who was he leaving his marked trail for?

The tracks of the third rider, the one who had come out of the woods and followed the pair, were imposed at several points on the prancing tracks, so that eliminated the mysterious one of the trio. That left either Freeman or the girl as the one who was doing it. And Weldon decided that if it had been the girl, Freeman would have observed her actions and would have stopped her doing it.

So, riding through the woods, Weldon reached the conclusion that Freeman was marking his trail either for the man who was riding somewhere behind him, or for Duffy, whom he might expect to follow him later—after Duffy had disposed of Weldon. In that case, Weldon supposed that there must have been some previous agreement between Freeman and Duffy about such markings. This put him on his guard against possible surprise, which opened the chance of his being sandwiched between his enemies on the trail.

They had reached a thick stand of pines, the oaks having thinned out, when Weldon saw the tracks of the third man turn off the trail into a narrow deer-trace which ran through an almost impenetrable jungle of brush and gnarled saplings. The other two horses continued along the main trail.

Weldon pulled up and studied the significance of this, but

could make nothing definite of it, and so he continued following the two horses. That was where his interest lay.

But he did not follow directly on the trail, for with the third man's disappearance from the trail, there was increased danger for him. The man could well be hiding behind a bush, waiting to pick him off as he rode by. He recalled Grizzly's words, "You don't know who's behind them bushes," and with that he turned off the trail to the right, and rode through the brush parallel to it for a quarter of a mile.

There he reached a spring-fed branch and stopped to water his horse, as had the pair before him, and pulled his horse up before he exposed himself. He was looking at a small pine-log cabin at the edge of the natural clearing.

He dismounted and backed his horse into the woods off the trail and tied him up, freeing himself to reconnoiter the ground. This cabin was a heavy barricade for a man, and it could not be approached with any safety at all.

The front of the cabin had an open doorway, but no door, and there was a similar window opening. To walk across the clearing in the direction of the doorway would amount to suicide, and Weldon decided against it for the time.

Afoot, he circled the clearing, keeping to the trees and examining the terrain around the cabin. There were neither side nor back windows to the place, so that he could not approach and surprise Freeman by entering from a rear opening. There was no help in that direction, and Weldon returned to the point where he had left his horse.

He had not realized until now how much the fight had taken out of him. He had found it difficult to get into his saddle on account of the pain left in his ribs by the pressure of Duffy's bear hug. His arm muscles were aching, and his leg muscles felt as though he had just completed a fifty-mile run. His face was a battered pulp, and there was a general weakness in him, a weariness brought on by his almost continuous activity which ended in the fight. He knew that what he needed was rest, but there was no rest in prospect for a long time to come.

He gave his attention back to the cabin, planning a method

of attack. And every plan seemed like a plan to commit suicide. The Morehead man had the girl in there; of that he was convinced. But how to get her out was the big problem. He could not just start shooting into the place with the hope of smoking Freeman out, for that would endanger the girl.

He finally decided he would have to go in through the front door and get Freeman. There was no other way. There was a man hidden somewhere in the brush, and there was the possibility that Duffy would be coming along sooner or later.

He went again through the woods until he reached the side of the cabin, and approached it from its blind end. This saved him from having to traverse the open clearing under sight of Freeman's gun. After that, it was up to luck.

He crossed the clearing safely around the corner from the door of the cabin, and reached its outer wall.

And then without pause, he rounded the corner of the house. The doorway of the cabin was empty, and he broke into a fast trot in order to cover the dozen steps quickly. That was when he heard the pistol shot, and felt his leg give way under him. He hit the ground sliding.

The shot came from behind a clump of buckbrush about fifty paces in front of the cabin door, and not from the cabin itself. Lying prone on the ground, Weldon turned his gaze and his gun in that direction, and saw Freeman rise out of the brush with his gun in his hand.

It dawned on him then that Freeman had somehow spotted him, had anticipated his actions, and had run out to the concealment of the brush, and had thus turned the tables on him. But he had not time now to criticize himself for having fallen into the trap.

Freeman was standing up to take a more careful aim at him, and Weldon did not wait further, but threw a quick shot at the lean man. Freeman's hat went sailing out behind him, and Freeman dropped back into a crouch behind the brush.

Weldon threw two quick shots into the brush, and heard Freeman yell. Freeman, realizing that concealment was not

protection, left the brush, blood running down the left sleeve of his shirt. And having no protection, he had no way to turn, except toward Weldon. He started running at Weldon, shooting as he ran.

Weldon was short of shells in his gun, and the running figure not making a good target, he held his fire. But Freeman was past using good judgment; he was running and firing at the same time.

And then a slug hit Weldon somewhere in his left shoulder and rolled him over. He heard two shots as his body hit the base of the cabin, the crack of Freeman's pistol and the deeper roar of a rifle. It was all confusing, and he did not know which shot hit him.

He rolled over on his face and lifted his gun toward Freeman. The muscles of his arm tightened as his finger started to press the trigger. Then he halted the impulse, took careful aim, and shot him through the head.

Freeman was running toward him queerly, his knees bending more and more with each shorter and shorter mincing step. His pistol hand was sinking, and as Weldon looked, the man dropped his weapon. And then with the next step he went forward on his face, and his two feet kicked the ground as though he thought he were still running. And then he was still.

Puzzled, Weldon's eyes went toward the woods, and he saw a grey puff of gunsmoke float lazily upward in the still morning air. And then there was silence.

Weldon, still lying prone, turned his pistol in the direction of the smoke puff and waited tensely. But there was no movement.

Keeping his eyes fastened on the woods, he began testing his body, moving his muscles carefully, trying to find out by feel whether he was badly wounded. Since his body was already a mass of bruises, he had some difficulty in finding any new place that did not hurt him.

He explored his arm by writhing and by feeling his shoulder with his hand. The bullet had apparently dug up a little flesh, but he could not identify any serious wound. He twisted to a

sitting position and examined his leg. There was a clean flesh wound through the calf, but it had not touched the bone.

He was bruised, and he was shot up, but he did not feel as though he were permanently injured. He turned and crawled toward the door of the cabin, keeping an eye on the woods. He reached the opening and crawled into the clay-floored shelter without attracting another shot from the woods, and inside the darkened building, he breathed a deep breath of relief. And then he heard the voice.

"Are you all right, Jim?"

It was June Lockridge. She was lying on the old built-in bunk across the cabin, her arms and legs tied together with a lariat.

"I'm all in one piece, at least," Weldon answered, and lifted himself to his feet with the aid of the door frame.

He reached her and sat down beside her on the bunk while he untied the rope which bound her. There was a growing throbbing in his leg, and a weakness coming over it which made it difficult for him to stand.

"Did Freeman mistreat you in any way?" he asked.

"No," the girl answered, getting to her feet. "He was just a crabby old man who was doing a job he didn't like. He told me so, and I believe him."

There was the sound of footsteps outside the cabin, and Weldon lifted his gun out of his holster. The girl cringed back in the corner while he waited with his gun trained on the door opening.

Then the footsteps stopped some distance from the house, and a man shouted.

"Weldon?"

Weldon answered, "Who is it?"

"Rank Heddon. Can I come in?"

"Come on," Weldon answered, and lowered his gun.

Rank Heddon came up to the cabin and entered, carrying a Winchester under his arm. He looked at the girl first, and asked, "You all right, miss?" And when she nodded, he turned to Weldon.

"Good thing I trailed Freeman. He'd have got you."

"Was that you shooting from the woods?" Weldon answered.

"Sure. Freeman would have drilled you square if I hadn't put a bullet through him in time. I throwed his aim off so you could get him."

"Well, thanks," Weldon answered. He was having some difficulty figuring Heddon. "I owe you something for that."

"No. You got me out of a fix the other night. I was glad to be able to pay something on my account."

"How come you to get on his trail, anyhow?"

"Duffy passed where I was camping at daylight this morning. I got curious about what he was up to, so I saddled and followed him up to Grizzly's store. I saw your horse and his outside, and by then I could hear you fighting inside. I slipped around back of the store to try to get inside and give you a hand. But I seen Freeman bringing the girl out back, and so I figured I'd do better by trailing him and seeing what was up than by joining the fight. I reckoned you could handle Duffy without help, but I didn't want the girl to get mislaid."

"Some people would have shot Freeman when he started out with the girl," Weldon observed. He didn't want to ask the question directly.

"I thought of that," Heddon admitted, "but I thought Freeman would lead me to something. And he did. There's been some kind of a tie-up between Morehead and the wild bunch all along, I figured. Well, this trail we followed leads on further up the mountains. I got a feeling that if we followed it on up higher, we would run into some kind of a hideout ranch or something."

"That's twice the idea of a hideout place has come up," Weldon said thoughtfully. "There might be something to it."

"I'll find out sooner or later," Heddon said confidently.

There was something unusual about Heddon now, which Weldon could not quickly identify. It seemed as if he were not the same man as the worthless old nester he had known. It was as though he were seeing a much more self-confident

man, a man who stood more on his own two feet than the nester had done. He seemed surer of himself, less afraid.

Weldon thought of the slaughtered cows, but withheld any comment on them for the present. While there was no question that on general principles it was wrong for a man to kill his neighbor's stock, the present situation was so entangled that it would not be an easy matter to decide just how wrong Heddon was, if he were wrong.

Heddon leaned his rifle up against the wall. "I don't think we'll be bothered for a while," he said, "but, miss, would you kind of keep an eye on the edge of the clearing? I'll see if I can't patch Weldon up a bit. He looks like he needs it."

CHAPTER 15

JIM WELDON needed more than to be patched up, for a reaction had finally set in. He had been through too much in these few days and nights, and he was bleeding badly.

He sat down wearily on the side of the board bunk and held his head in his hands for a moment while sheer weakness drained the remainder of his strength out of him.

June Lockridge looked at him apprehensively. She saw the dull purple splotches where Duffy's fists had marked his face. Her sight of the blood-soaked shirt and the blood on his pants leg brought her fear.

She said, "Let's see how bad those wounds are."

Heddon got the bloody shirt and undershirt off Weldon and explored the shoulder wound as best he could. He lifted Weldon's arm by the hand and moved the whole arm with a rotating motion. "Feel any bone hurt?" he asked.

"No, just muscles and the flesh."

"Reckon that ain't too dangerous, then," Heddon said hopefully. "Bullet just ploughed up a little meat. That'll grow back without no trouble. Ought to wash it and bandage it up, though."

Heddon turned and studied the girl a moment. "Reckon you could kind of cover me with that rifle while I went down

to the creek and got some water?" he asked. "I don't think we're liable to have no trouble for a little while, but we'd better keep an eye open."

"All right," she answered, and Heddon went out of the cabin and toward the creek, while she watched the edges of the clearing with the rifle in her hands.

He came back in a few minutes with an old lard bucket full of clear water. "Saw that bucket when I passed it earlier," he said. "Somebody left it at the spring."

He made a fire of small limbs and brought the water to a boil. He looked at Weldon's bloody shirt and undershirt and shook his head. "Ought to have some clean rags for bandages," he said, "but we ain't, so we ain't."

"Just a minute," the girl answered, and went out the door. She returned and said, "Use this." She handed Heddon her petticoat.

Heddon and the girl got the shoulder wound washed in hot water and bandaged, and then Heddon said, "You'd better take a walk, now. I'll have to get his clothes off to get to that leg wound."

The girl said, "When you get his pants off, hand them out to me and I'll take them to the creek and wash the blood out of them."

Heddon worked awkwardly but with a strong purpose. Sleep was dragging at Weldon's eyelids, and his body was becoming insensitive to the pain of his wounds. He had the feeling that he was going to slip out of consciousness, and that all this would be as though it had never happened. He tried to fight against it, but in another moment he was lying on his back on the bunk without knowledge of anything going on about him, and he finally passed out completely.

When he regained consciousness his first reaction was that every bone in his body ached, that every muscle was sore, and that his body was a mass of pains and hurts. He tried to move, but the very effort was a torture.

He stirred himself a little, and the girl stepped into the cabin

from outside, Heddon following her. She came over and put her hand on his forehead.

"You're all right," she assured him. "But don't try to get up."

His shirt and pants had been washed and dried in the sun and put back on him, and he observed these things and looked at the girl. She colored slightly, and said, "You couldn't wear your clothes like they were."

Heddon went out and came back holding an empty tomato can. "I dug up some sassafras roots and made you some tea," he said. "It ain't much to speak of without milk and sugar, but it's hot and maybe it'll make you feel better."

Weldon took the tin can, drank the herb tea with relish, and its heat put new life into his body.

"Now maybe I can get up and quit being so much trouble to you," he said as he handed the can back to Heddon.

"Better not," Heddon said. "It won't be long till night now, and we oughtn't to stay here too long. Duffy could be along any time; I can't figure how come he ain't showed up before."

"Rank Heddon has been standing guard down at the head of the trail with his rifle all day," the girl said.

Weldon again had to wonder at the change in the man.

"I'm getting deeper into your debt all the time," he said.

"We're both fighting the same enemy," Heddon said. "I'm just doing what I can."

"But you're doing all this for me when you could be in a safer place by yourself."

There was a great depth to his seriousness when Heddon answered. "I reckon I haven't been any too much of a neighbor to anybody in my time," he said. "But I've been doing a lot of thinking lately. And maybe I ain't altogether doing this for you. Like the feller said, we either got to hang together or hang separate. So, helpin' keep you alive is in a way the same as tryin' to stay alive myself."

"I see what you mean," Weldon answered. His mind was on Duffy. "It strikes me that Duffy would have followed Freeman's tracks up here before now."

"I-thought that at first," Heddon said. "But it just occurs to me; if he had started up this way, he'd have seen your tracks and mine, and he'd have known that Freeman wouldn't be here alone with the girl. He knows we could have got the drop on him and he wouldn't have had a chance against us. But at the same time, he'd almost know that he's got himself into something where he can't afford to have us runnin' free knowin' all we do about him. The way I reason, he'd get himself some help before he braced us. He might be tryin' to round up some of his friends of the wild bunch. Or going back to the ranch for help."

"Well, that gives us a few hours, anyway."

"Yes," Heddon admitted, "but I wouldn't depend on having much more time. It won't be any trouble for Duffy to find us here, and he'll try it the minute he's set."

"You're right about that," Weldon admitted. "We'd better get going. If you'd bring my horse to the door."

Weldon did not know how weak he was, but Heddon knew, and objected. "It ain't going to be easy, the shape you're in. We'll be safe enough till dark, and we'll get started then. That'll give you a little more rest, and besides, we might run into Duffy coming this way. In daylight that wouldn't be so good."

Weldon moved his body slightly, and the weakness and pain in it made him thankful for the extra minutes he would have before getting started.

"All right," he agreed.

Heddon turned his head away, and the girl looked out the door. Weldon's face was grey and drawn, making the bruised spots show up black and ugly. His eyes were sunken in their sockets, and fever made them unnaturally bright. He did not look as though he could get from his bunk to a horse.

Heddon rolled a cigarette and lit it and placed it in Weldon's mouth. Weldon inhaled it deeply, and the effort brought pain to his ribs, but the smoke gave him some ease. Then Heddon went over and sat down against the wall with his Winchester beside him and his eyes on the woods past the clearing. They

had an hour or so to wait in the safety of the cabin before darkness fell.

Then Heddon asked, "How many men did you and Morehead lose in the scrap last night? I didn't get to stay and find out."

Weldon observed the man closely. Heddon did not meet his eyes, but kept looking out the door. Weldon felt a bitter urge in him to face Heddon with the evidence that he deliberately brought on this fight, but decided against it. He thought of Brandlies and Turley, his two good friends that had probably been buried by now. Heddon's precipitating this battle had been the direct cause of their deaths.

"We lost Brandlies and Turley," he said evenly, watching Heddon's face. "We counted about five of Morehead's men dead. All mountain men, none of them his regular crew."

"So," Heddon mused, keeping his eyes away from Weldon. "That accounts for only seven of them coming back to the mountains last night. And you lost two?"

"Two. Both good men, and friends of mine."

Heddon was silent a long moment. Then he said, "It's tough to lose a friend, I reckon. But it seems to me that a man could look at it this way. Let's say that Morehead is a smart man, and that he had laid his plans very careful, so that he could get rid of everybody he wanted to be rid of, one at a time. Say he just nibbled away at the valley in little bites, hitting the weakest people first, the ones that the rest of the people wouldn't risk themselves to protect. That way, he could get rid of them one at a time, and every one that he got rid of separately like that without getting people so mad that they organized against him, well, that would keep quietly reducing the total number of them that could organize against him if they wanted to. He could keep nibbling like that till it was too late for his opposition to get organized and hit back. He could bite off one ranch at a time till he had got rid of everybody. There'd be a lot of people killed; maybe Brandlies and Turley among them.

"But suppose, on the other hand, somebody stuck a spoke

in his wheel. Suppose the way things happened, he found himself in a big fight right off the bat. That would break up his carefully-laid plans, and throw him clean off balance. And it would also make everybody realize in a hurry what he was up to and how dangerous he was, and so they'd get together and organize to defend themselves before it was too late. Morehead would have to start all over with his plans, and the rest of the people would start planning at the same time, and so Morehead wouldn't have as big an advantage as he had figured. Of course, somebody would get hurt, but maybe not as many people as would die if Morehead went on and worked his plan of fighting people one at a time. So, in that case, Brandlies and Turley's deaths would be the means of saving lots of lives. Did you stop to look at it that way?"

Lying on his bunk, Weldon studied this point of view, and despite the hurt in him at the loss of his friends, he began to see that in the larger view, Heddon's argument made sense. Somebody had to die in order that others might live. He had already accepted that fact for himself. That was the substance of Heddon's argument, and that was a truth which Weldon knew and accepted.

"Heddon, I hadn't thought of you as a philosopher."

Heddon shifted uncomfortably, moving his rifle to his other arm. "Well, I'll tell you, Weldon. A lot of people have called me a lazy man. I never done much for myself or my family, and so folks allowed that I just wasn't worth the powder it would take to kill me. Everybody thinks a man like that is a man who don't have no wishes nor the mind to do anything for himself. They allow that he just don't care, and ain't got the energy to do something if he wanted to. Well, sir, that ain't so. It ain't that he don't want to do nothing. He has his dreams and his wishes just like anybody else. But the trouble is that he is a man trying to serve two masters inside himself, and them two masters tells him to do two different things that is just the opposite of each other. He is like a mule that has got two ropes around his neck, with one man pulling him to the right and another pulling him to the left. With them pull-

ing in opposite directions the mule can't go either way. And even if you was to hitch a team to each of the ropes, that is, if you was to increase the pressure about the same amount on each rope, your mule still wouldn't be able to go in either direction; he'd just stand still and be tore apart inside. Well, sir, there is your lazy man; he ain't just standing still from choice, he's a man that's being tore apart from being pulled in two directions at once. He's a man that suffers agony every minute of his life. And believe me, I know what I am talking about."

Suddenly Heddon looked very self-conscious. And, ashamed of having revealed himself, he got to his feet, quickly changing the subject. "It's getting dark," he said. "I'll go round up the horses. Miss, you hold this rifle and keep your eye on the clearing. We got a hard ride ahead of us."

Heddon went out, carrying his pistol as he crossed the clearing toward the horses.

Weldon turned his gaze toward the girl who had been sitting silent, her chin cupped in the palm of her hand. They looked at each other, and in their exchange of looks, there was a silent communication.

June Lockridge came hesitantly over to the bunk and sat down on it. She placed her cool hand on Weldon's forehead and said, "A little fever. Do you think you can ride?"

"Why not?" Weldon answered. "A man doesn't die from a couple of flesh wounds."

"Jim," she said. "The other night you said I was a bitter person. Remember?"

"Yes. I shouldn't have said that. It's none of my business."

"Now maybe you can understand why," she said. "My father and I left Missouri looking for a place where we could build a home and live like he wanted to live. There is no room for little people; we are not welcome anywhere. They've already come and burned our home, and they've shot my father. I came along voluntarily with this Freeman man in the hope that it would keep Duffy from killing my father. But I don't even know whether he is alive or dead."

"I should have told you this before," Weldon said quickly. "But your father is alive and safe at my house. As safe as any of us could be under the circumstances. The doctor has been there, and your father is all right. Mrs. Heddon and her daughter are there looking after things."

A great load seemed to roll off the girl's shoulders, and her tremendous relief showed in her face and in her words. "Thanks, Jim."

"You can thank the Heddon boy for that," Weldon answered. "He found him and brought him over to the place. Of course, the trouble is not over yet, and if he doesn't want to be mixed up in it—"

"It isn't that," the girl said. "My dad is willing to fight. I'm willing to go through with whatever is necessary. You people are different, you and your friends. You haven't tried to destroy us. You've even tried to help us. And that's all we ask, just a chance to make a home for ourselves. So, I'm not bitter any longer. I know that there are people out here who are willing to give you a chance, who will even help you."

The sound of trampling horses' hooves came into the open cabin, and then Heddon was here with the three animals. He came into the cabin and looked over at Weldon. "There's something funny about Duffy not showing up before now," he said. "I don't like it a bit. You can gamble he didn't just run home with his tail between his legs."

"Whatever he did," Weldon said, "we've got to get going."

"Think you can make it?"

"Of course," Weldon answered.

He sat up on the bunk, putting his feet on to the floor. Bracing himself with his two hands against the edge of the bunk, he stood up. He limped out the door and caught hold of his saddle horn with one hand. He stood leaning a moment, and the cold sweat broke out on his forehead. But this was no time for a man to be giving in to a weakness.

Heddon guided the foot of his injured leg into the stirrup, then gave him a boost upward. Weldon fell over the seat of the saddle, took a deep breath, and then squirmed into a sitting

position and picked up the reins. The others mounted and they headed across the dark clearing and into the trail.

Weldon slumped in the saddle, every step the horse took sending a rhythmic pain through his body.

Heddon led the way and the girl brought up the rear, with Weldon's horse between them. And in this order, they worked slowly down the trail. It was black in the woods, and they made slow time. Following the trail downward, it was so dark that they could only keep aware of each other by the sound of the horses and the creaking of the saddles. Weldon felt his little strength being slowly extracted from him with every jolt of his horse's feet. He clung to the saddle horn with his hand and held on while the slow minutes and hours ticked off. Coming up the trail this morning, the ride had been only a few hours' duration, and that uphill, but with the necessarily slow movement of the animals in the darkness, there now seemed to be no meaning to time, it was an eternal thing which went on and on without end, with each passing moment a little slower and a little more painful than the one before it. Occasionally they would pull up for a rest. Weldon was trying to hide his weakness from them, but they both sensed it, and they were in charge of him. He had to stay aboard his saddle.

It was around two or three o'clock in the morning when Heddon pulled them to a stop at a point where the trail crossed a gravelly dry wash.

"There's a place up this wash where you can hole up while I go and look around," he told them. "And from now on, I wouldn't be making too much noise. Wildcat is right around the bend, and we don't know what's going on down there."

"I think we ought to keep right on going," Weldon said. "I'd like to get home as soon as I can. I don't like to be away with things like they are."

"I know," Heddon answered. "But we couldn't even get down to the flats before daylight, and we'd be right in the path of anybody that was looking for us for the rest of the

trip. And besides, you couldn't make it all the way home without rest."

That was the way Weldon felt about it, but he had intended forcing himself to make the try, fearing that Morehead, if he learned from Duffy that he—Weldon—was up in the hills, would seize the occasion to make a strike of some kind against the ranches and farms. But Heddon's argument carried weight; no good could come of risking the girl in the thick of the lower reaches of the mountains while Duffy was looking for them. He gave way to Heddon's argument, and they turned up the dry creek bed.

Heddon halted after a few minutes of this rough travel up the dry creek bed. "I've slept here a time or two," he explained. "There's a little spring here for drinking water, and there's a kind of hidden cave that the water has eaten out. You'll be safe till I get back."

"Where are you figuring on going?" Weldon asked.

"I'm going down into Wildcat and smell out what's going on," Heddon answered. "I thought I'd wake Grizzly up and see if he could give me a bite of food, and find out from him if he knows anything."

"You might get the food," Weldon said, "provided he don't shoot you for waking him up. But as for information, what you'd get out of him wouldn't be worth the trip."

"Maybe," Heddon answered. "And again, maybe I can get him to talk. Anyhow, I'll see. Miss, you kind of keep this rifle handy, and if you hear a noise use it. I'll signal like a coyote barking when I come back."

He gathered up the reins of the three animals. "I'm going to hide the horses and walk down the rest of the way."

After Heddon had left the rifle with them and had gone on with the horses, Weldon leaned against the stone sidewall of the cave while he took his bearings. Apparently, this wash had once been the bed of a good-sized creek, and at this point it had cut a wide path through the stones, leaving a small canyon almost fifty feet across. The ground beneath them was flat sandstone, and little growth was possible, so that now

instead of the solid darkness of the woods, a long narrow canopy of starlit sky knifed above them, giving them just enough light to see around them.

The cave was in the wall of the canyon and behind a boulder as high as a horse's back, and thus was hidden even from a person passing along the floor of the old creek bed. They went into its solid darkness and settled down on its stone floor to await Heddon's return.

"You had better get some sleep," the girl warned him.

"I don't understand what's wrong," Weldon complained. "These wounds are not too bad."

"It's just exhaustion," the girl said sharply. "Judging by the marks Duffy left on you, your fight was enough to put an ordinary man in the hospital for a month. And you lost enough blood from those bullet wounds to float a rowboat."

He lay on the stone floor of the cave intending to stay awake, but sleep flooded him instantly. The girl laid her hand on his forehead and felt the heat of a rising fever in him. She sat beside him with her face to the mouth of the cave, and with the rifle in her lap.

She placed her hand on his forehead again, feeling the heat of the fever in him, but she knew that it was not for this reason that she had touched him. It was a possessive gesture that she dared not even admit to herself.

He stirred, and she knew that he had suddenly awakened. She said, "He's not back yet. Go back to sleep."

He dozed off again, and she sat beside him with the rifle as time ticked away. She tried to think back over the events of the last hours, and she shivered at the thought of what would have happened if Weldon hadn't got to Grizzly's place ahead of Duffy.

After a long time the sharp bark of a coyote startled her out of her reverie, and then she heard the thump of boots and a moment later, Heddon's low voice. Then he came into the darkness of the cave and dropped a gunny sack on the stone floor. He shook Weldon's shoulder and Weldon jerked into a sitting position, coming out of a sound sleep.

"Better swallow some of this stuff pretty quick," Heddon said. "Duffy has half a dozen men set to cover every trail out of here at daylight." He had his knife out and was cutting the lids out of tin cans as he spoke.

He passed an opened can of peaches over to the girl, and started cutting the lid out of a tomato can as he continued. "Grizzly damn near murdered me for waking him up," he chuckled, "and you owe him three dollars for this grub."

Weldon tipped the tomato can to his mouth and drank the juice down thirstily. "I didn't expect him to leave enough of you to come back," he said.

"He cussed the daylights out of me," Heddon admitted. "So I just told him the whole story. Be damned if it wasn't the first time I ever saw the man act human since I knew him. He tried to keep from showing it, but he was plumb worried about you, Miss. He sent them peaches out of his private stock." Heddon reached into his shirt and brought out a pint whiskey bottle with a label and seal on it. "And he sent you this, Weldon. That's the tip-off that he had a human streak in him—sending you this bonded likker instead of the panther sweat he peddles as a usual thing."

Weldon finished his tomatoes, opened the bottle and took a stiff drink of whiskey. He felt the heat of it course through his veins and bring back some of his strength. His rest had worked a miracle in him, and with the drink, he felt still better. The old restless urge came back to him, and he felt the need of movement.

"About Duffy," he said. "You get that from Grizzly, too?"

"Yeah. You know how he talks—roundabout, instead of saying what he's got to say. But what I got was that Duffy had rounded up about half a dozen of the mountain boys by offering them a hundred dollars a head for each of us. He'll take you or me dead or alive; the girl he wants alive."

"I feel slighted," the girl said after she had drained the peach can. "I ought to be worth a little something dead."

"Me," Heddon answered, "I feel right important. I reckon

it's the first time in my life that my hide was worth more than a flea-bit coyote."

"It just goes to prove what a dance hall girl once told me," Weldon chuckled. "The harder you are to get, the more they want you. You say Duffy is going to have all trails watched?"

"Yeah. I got that from Grizzly, then he went meandering off, talking about a time he chased a deer down some dry ravine that started at a spring that was located by three big old twisted pine trees. He went on telling how he chased that deer plumb down to the prairie before he got him. Hell of a time to be talking about deer hunting, I thought."

"Not a bit of it," Weldon answered with a new alertness. "He knew I had hunted all this side of the mountains. I know where that spring is, and Grizzly knows I do. He was telling us to go out that way. You ready to start?"

"Sure," Heddon answered. "As soon as I finish eating these here salmons. I never in my life had a whole can of salmon all by myself, and I may not live to have another one."

CHAPTER 16

THEY GOT STARTED after a while, and instead of backtracking to the trail they had left, Heddon led them on upstream in the dry wash until they had passed through the canyon and came to a deer trail crossing the bottom. Here they left the wash and took the deer trail downhill again.

"I only know this trail as far as where it crosses a horse trail under a kind of natural bridge," Heddon said. "I used to take the horse trail back to Wildcat."

"I can take it from there," Weldon answered. "I know that bridge, and I know where Grizzly's three pines are from it. We're not lost."

They kept on through the night riding single file along the twisting deer trail until they came to the rock formation that Heddon had mentioned. There was a grey light in the east by then, and Weldon recognized the natural bridge under which

their trail passed. They were at last in terrain that he knew well.

They picked up the ravine at the spring and followed it downward for half an hour, while the grey sky overhead faded into light, and the shadows of the trees and boulders along their path began to take on individual shapes. It would be good daylight down on the prairie by now.

Weldon had taken the lead when they hit the ravine, and now he pulled up suddenly and raised his hand in a signal, halting the girl and Heddon. A sound ahead of him had caught his ear and stopped him. The three riders froze in their saddles and waited.

Again the sound came to Weldon, and this time the others heard it, and instinctively patted their horses' necks to quiet them. Heddon, who had been riding with his rifle across his saddle, lifted the weapon, hand on the trigger and the barrel cradled in his left arm. Weldon had his pistol out.

The ravine made a sharp bend just ahead of them, and the sound came from that way now. And then it was upon them. A white-tail deer burst around the bend; saw them ahead and slid to a stop, eyeing them wildly.

The buck took one good look at them, standing puzzled a moment. He swung his head around as if considering retreat. Then he suddenly hit the edge of the ravine and crashed through the brush, rather than retreating.

Heddon pulled up alongside Weldon who was already sliding from his horse. "Somebody down ahead of us flushed him up. Better hit for the brush."

The girl had slid off her horse by now and was beside them. Weldon looked at her face, and it showed no fright at all as she stood silently waiting for the decision.

"We can't keep going on horseback," Weldon said. "They could hear us a mile—if they haven't already heard us."

"Then suppose we go straight on," the girl said. "If we meet somebody, we just have to meet them."

"All right, then," Weldon said. "We'll walk and lead the

horses. June, you get behind me and Heddon. And duck at the first sign of trouble. Let's go."

They did not get started, for at that moment the ring of horses' hooves on rock came to their ears, and they froze. The next instant two mountaineers came around the bend, coming up the draw toward them. The men had rifles across their saddle horns, and they were examining the sides of the draw, and watching all around them as they rode.

One of their horses whinnied at the sight of the Weldon animals, and the two men jerked their mounts up with a speed that set them back on their hind feet.

Heddon lifted his rifle and Weldon lifted his gun, at the same time warning, "Hold it!" He had no positive knowledge that these men were after him, and he would not shoot unless it was in self-defence.

They stood thus, waiting the next move of the mountaineers. They had little time to wait before they knew the men's intentions, however. The mountain man named Josh was already lifting his rifle, while the second man was trying to get his horse under control.

Weldon took a quick step aside just as Josh's gun roared. The rifle bullet hit the rocky wall of the draw and sped off with an angry whine, Josh at the same time wheeling his horse into movement. The second mountaineer, seeing Heddon raising his rifle on him, and unable to quiet his horse, slid out of his saddle to escape a bullet.

Weldon drew a bead on Josh, but the man's moving horse kept Josh wavering in the sights, so that when Weldon triggered his weapon, the bullet hit the horse in the shoulder and the animal went down, spilling Josh out of sight behind a rock.

The second mountaineer dived behind Josh's threshing horse just as Heddon's rifle roared, and from that protection he returned the fire. Josh was out of sight, and Weldon recognized the danger in this and started running forward, disregarding the man firing from behind the horse.

Weldon heard Josh work his way through the brush on the side of the cutbank, and followed him upward. He could not

let the man escape to run free and do his sniping from the concealment of the underbrush.

He came up on to the lip of the cut just as he saw Josh's form emerge from behind a clump of elders, and he stopped and threw two shots at the man. Josh snapped one shot at him and dived back into the draw. Weldon dashed after him, caught his foot on the edge of the draw at a point where run-off water had undercut it. The bank gave way under his weight and he tumbled down the ten feet distance to the floor of the draw, carrying rock and loose earth with him. He rolled out of the rubbish he was mixed in and got to his hands and knees.

Josh had slid down the bank and was now getting to his feet facing Weldon. He lifted his rifle this time and took slower and more deliberate aim. Weldon did not have time to aim his handgun, but, on hands and knees, snapped a shot with his elbow resting on the ground. He fired again, then held his fire.

The second shot caught Josh in the middle, knocking him over sideways against the wall of the draw, and loosening the clay and gravel around him so that it made a small landslide around his body. He slid to his knees along with the yellow earth, poised a moment as if in prayer, then toppled over head first and lay still.

Weldon had been conscious of other firing during this period, but now that had stopped, leaving an uncanny silence in the wooded mountainside. Now he tried to get to his feet, but he had to grasp a root growing out of the cutbank in order to lift himself up. The old pains were fresh again in his body, and he was breathing heavily. He made his way back up the ravine bed toward the point where he had left the others.

He saw the surviving mountaineer disappearing through the brush on the bank above the draw. A few steps farther along, he saw the girl backed up against the wall of the draw with Heddon's rifle covering him. She recognized him and lowered it.

Heddon lay on the ground at the girl's feet.

Weldon came up and dropped down beside Heddon, asking the girl, "How bad is he hurt?"

"I haven't had a chance to find out," the girl answered. "When he fell I grabbed his gun and held that man off till you came up."

Weldon found the hair on Heddon's head matted with blood, and his exploring fingers located the wound. "Just a crease, apparently," he said. "He might come around in a little while. I saw a spring a few steps down there where I can get some water."

He went back and got water in his hat and brought it back and worked over Heddon until the man regained his senses. Heddon had surprising stamina, and pretty soon he got to his feet of his own accord.

"I reckon my head is the thickest part of me," he said. "But it sure aches right now. Did we get both of them?"

"No," Weldon answered seriously. "One got away. And those shots will call the rest of them this way. Can you ride?"

"Sure," Heddon answered. "It was my head that was hit; not the seat of my breeches."

Now as they mounted they threw caution aside; there was no further effort at secrecy, and they forced their animals down the slope as fast as they could safely negotiate the twisted and tangled path. The sun climbed higher, and they rode through alternating fingers of sunlight and shadows, crossed open patches where they were exposed until the woods again swallowed them up, but every yard of travel brought them closer to the foot of the mountainside.

Weldon rode with his left foot out of the saddle, favoring his injured leg. Heddon rode limply, half in a daze from the effect of the bullet crease. The girl rode erect in her saddle, showing no sign of fear.

They had passed out of the ravine and were travelling along fairly smooth sloping ground under pines that had become larger and farther apart. Their horses' hooves made little sound in the carpet of fallen pine needles.

Weldon had just led them around the end of a great windfall tree when he shouted and pulled his horse up so short that the others almost ran into him. He was pulling his pistol before his horse settled down.

Duffy and two men appeared in the timber ahead of them, coming upward from below. One of Duffy's men pointed and shouted, and Weldon's party instinctively spread out, pulling their horses away from each other.

Weldon shouted to Heddon, "Get her away from here. I'll hold 'em."

He fired just as Duffy raised his rifle and let go. Heddon, to the side of Weldon, had his rifle up and sent two shots through the pines as fast as he could lever the weapon, then moved his horse toward the protection of a big pine.

The men in front of them were on the move now, everybody seeking protection in the trees, everybody risking quick shots. One of Duffy's bullets nicked the bole of a pine and threw chips in Weldon's face as he turned to see what the girl was doing.

The sound of the shooting was confined beneath the tops of the trees, and the air rocked with the roaring and the echoing of the thundering weapons. One of Duffy's men slid out of his saddle and dived behind a fallen tree. He raised his rifle over the tree trunk and then lifted his head. Weldon shot him between the eyes before he could sight his gun. The horses were all spooked, prancing and fighting the reins in their panic, and the shooting was far from accurate.

Weldon saw that they were wasting precious ammunition, and he shouted to Heddon to slow down, at the same time taking more careful aim. The knife rays of light coming down through the trees mottled everything, made outlines vague, and the scant sapling pines blended in with the moving figures passing between them making the outlines of target indistinct.

Weldon caught up with Heddon and the girl and said, "Try to go around them to the left. There's no sense in this running around popping off shells at each other. We want to get out of here."

"Are you running from them?" Heddon asked in disgust.

"No. Just running for the open country. They'll follow, and we'll take every decent shot we get at them."

They tried to cut around Duffy and his men, pushing through the trees, taking advantage of each clump of saplings, working downward always. There was a lull in the shooting now, and Weldon and Heddon reloaded their weapons one at a time.

They had made perhaps a quarter of a mile when one of Duffy's men broke into sight ahead of them and slid off his horse. He started dashing for the protection of a big pine, from which he could have picked them off one at a time.

Weldon threw two quick shots at him and the man dived headlong behind the pine. He lay face down kicking the ground with his two feet like a swimmer in water. Then his exposed feet and legs became still, and the man's horse disappeared among the trees.

A frightened owl screeched and flapped away through the tree tops. The echoes of the shots rolled down the mountain-side like summer thunder, and Weldon and his party spurred their horses on again.

Weldon was reloading as they rode, Heddon covering him. Suddenly Heddon's rifle roared and Heddon pulled his horse up short. Weldon looked at him. Heddon was standing in his stirrups and just bringing his rifle down, his eyes still staring at a clump of juniper.

Weldon looked at the juniper, and behind it he saw the vague outline of the body of a man rising to his feet. The man came up with his two hands in the air, like a jack-in-the-box, stood poised that way a moment with a look of shocked surprise on his face. Then he tumbled head forward into the green needles of the bush, and was balanced there with his head down and his buttocks high, as though he were drinking out of a spring. He did not move again.

"That one nearly had us," Heddon swore. "The damned woods is full of them."

"The way I figure it, that only leaves Duffy close by," Wel-

don answered. "And I don't much count on him coming out to face us by himself. It's not his way of doing things."

"There must be others, if there was six altogether," Heddon argued. "Grizzly said there was six."

"There'd be some of them blocking other trails," Weldon answered. "Anyway, we've got a chance to make it now. It's not far to the foot of the mountain. We'd better make a run for it."

At that moment Weldon stopped dead still. He had caught a glimpse of something black moving far down the trail, but in the diffused light he could not make out for sure what it was.

"You two stay right here," he said, sliding off his horse. "I want to see something."

He had the idea that Duffy had not headed out when he lost his two men, but was skulking down below, waiting to snipe at them when they passed.

On the ground he spoke to Heddon while he checked his gun. "Just stay here while I take a look. But keep your eyes peeled." Then he slid off the trail and was swallowed up in some small pine brush.

Working his way silently down the hillside, stepping softly on the carpet of pine humus, he studied the ground before him and the layout of the trees, the standing ones and the deadfalls. This was a perfect place for a sniper, and Duffy would know it as well as he. He was convinced that the slight movement he had seen was Duffy's big black horse, and that Duffy was hiding somewhere down below, waiting for them to come into reach of his gun.

He heard squirrels quarrelling in a big oak which grew beside a monstrous boulder two hundred feet below him. He stopped and listened, and the cheeping squirrels told him something. They were scolding Duffy. Duffy was behind that boulder.

Weldon carried his gun low; he limped off to the right and started circling the boulder so that he could come in behind Duffy if Duffy was watching the trail. It took him a good fif-

teen minutes to negotiate his circle, and then when he came around the big pine he saw the man.

The big man had abandoned his horse, and he was half-way up the side of the big boulder, standing on a ledge of it so that just his head was above the greatest height of the stone. He had his rifle laid across the top of the boulder, its barrel settled in a deep crotch of the stone. Duffy was practically safe from any return fire from up the trail, and Weldon realized that the man could have killed them all before they would have been able even to locate him.

Duffy's attention was so concentrated on the trail that Weldon could have come all the way up to him on the silent carpet without his having heard him. Unconsciously, Weldon lifted his gun and aimed it squarely at Duffy's back, bringing it down in two short motions as though he were firing. He could not have missed—but he could not shoot the man in the back.

Weldon came on closer, making sure that he was well within pistol range, and then stopped.

"Looking for somebody, Duffy?" he asked.

The big man whirled around so suddenly in his surprise that he almost lost his footing on the rock ledge. He stood gaping at Weldon with his swollen mouth half open, one eye closed and black, and the other eye wide open in surprise. There was pity in Weldon for a moment, but he forced it aside.

"Were you looking for me?"

Still Duffy did not answer. He was caught in a pinch; he was facing death. He knew this, but his slow mind had not yet offered him a way out of it. He turned his head away from Weldon and looked at his rifle. He was still holding it at the breech, with his finger on the trigger and his thumb on the hammer. But the rifle was lying in the crotch of the rock, pointing up the trail, and he knew that he could not swing it around and fire before Weldon shot him.

Weldon saw that the man would not answer; he saw that the man was still trying to plan something.

"If you want to take your hand off that rifle and jump

down, I'll take you along with me. If you want to do something else, do it."

Duffy's voice was hoarse. "All right, Weldon. All right. I'll come down. Don't shoot."

"That makes sense," Weldon answered.

Duffy took his hand off the rifle and turned and jumped down to the ground, a distance of about five feet. As he landed, his knees bent so that he stopped in a squatting position, hands on the ground. And then he jerked erect—whipping his pistol from his holster as he sprang up. He fired before he was completely erect.

The bullet whizzed by Weldon's ear, and then Weldon raised his gun. Duffy was coming toward him in a crouching run. In the one eye that was open there was the light of madness, his thick underlip was hanging open, and he was firing wildly as he tried to cover the twenty feet that separated him from the only man who had ever whipped him.

Weldon stood sideways to the approaching Duffy, and he took time to aim his gun carefully before he fired. He heard the impact of the bullet as it struck Duffy's chest. The force of the slug brought Duffy up short, knocked a grunt out of him. He stood on bent knees and the look on his face was one of shocked surprise. The hand holding his gun sank slowly, as though he had changed his mind about using it. When it hung at arm's length, the weapon dropped noiselessly to the ground.

Duffy clawed at his chest with both hands in a sudden spurt of energy, as if trying to dig the bullet out of his body. And then his knees gave way completely, and he sank down on the dead pine needles, falling on his side. He rolled over on his face, and one arm went up and circled his head.

Weldon walked toward him, carrying his smoking gun ready, but when he reached Duffy and tried to roll him over with the toe of his boot, he knew that Duffy was dead.

CHAPTER 17

AT ABOUT THE TIME Weldon's party reached the foot of the mountains and safety, Dallas Morehead stepped out of his ranchhouse and went to his bunkhouse where he found Pancho Malone eating and Junior Freeman frying bacon. He spoke to young Freeman.

"Your father was gone all day yesterday," he said. "And he's not back yet. Where is he?"

The young Freeman was a shadow of his father, a lean, taciturn youth with a narrow sullen face. He did not look up, but turned pieces of bacon in the pan with a fork.

"I don't know," he answered. "Ask Duffy."

"Duffy is not here," Morehead answered sharply, "and I'm asking you. The bunch of you went together on that nester matter, and your father did not come back with the rest of you. I haven't seen him around since then. Where did he go?"

The young man did not have much backbone, and he threw an appealing glance at Pancho Malone. Malone busied himself with his eating and gave him no assurance. Morehead said, "Answer me, damn it. Do you hear me?"

Morehead's arrogance had often served him as a good weapon to browbeat his hands, and it worked on the inferior youth, who could not stand up against this show of authority.

"Why Duffy sent him on an errand, I reckon."

"What errand?" Morehead turned his growing wrath on Malone. "Where did Duffy send Freeman?"

Malone took his knife out of his mouth. There was a slight grin on his face. "Ask the kid."

"I'm asking you."

Malone shrugged. "I just don't know a thing about it. Maybe the kid can tell you."

Morehead glared at Malone a moment, but his arrogance would not work on the man, and he turned back to Junior Freeman.

"You answer my question and be quick about it," he

snapped. He was wearing his pearl-handled gun, but he did not even bother to make a threatening gesture toward it. He knew the youth.

"Duffy sent him up the mountain with a woman," the youth mumbled.

"A woman?" Morehead repeated unbelievably. "What woman? Are you crazy?"

"No, I ain't crazy. He sent him up to Grizzly's with that nester's daughter."

Morehead, in his burst of rage, blew out a long whistling breath. His face went white and he was speechless for a long moment. He took several steps back and forth the length of the bunkhouse table, then grabbed Malone by the shoulder, a visible sign of his agitation.

"Did you hear that? Is that right?"

Malone shrugged and continued his eating. Morehead's face went purple and he jerked Malone's shoulder around so that Malone spilled a piece of bacon off his knife. "Answer me, damn you. Did Duffy grab off one of those women."

Malone pushed the bench back and turned coldly. "Don't put your hands on me like that," he answered in a voice that was a threatening purr. "And don't ask me to tell you what your foreman did. I just work here. If you want to know anything, ask Duffy."

Morehead was a quick reader of men, and he knew that his anger had caused him to make a mistake in handling Malone. He changed his attitude from that of a domineering violence to one of reason.

"Listen here, Malone, I've got to know about this. If Duffy has done a damn fool trick like that, there'll be hell to pay. Getting rough with womenfolks is the worst move you can make."

"Don't look at me. I didn't have anything to do with it. I just do my work and draw my pay."

Morehead was thinking out loud. "So that was why he was so eager to follow Heddon up into the mountains. He said it might take him a couple of days to find him."

"That's what he said," Malone agreed.

"But what he meant was that he wanted to take a couple days' vacation with that woman right in the middle of this trouble. That dirty, thick-headed ox! He's through around here. I'll get me a foreman that's got a little time to tend to business when I need him."

"I was kind of thinking I'd like a foreman's job," Malone said gently.

"You've got a job," Morehead answered. "You just do what you're told, and you'll be all right."

"But I haven't got a job," Malone purred. "I resigned."

"When?"

"Just about thirty seconds ago. I hadn't had time to tell you up to now."

"You can't quit me in the middle of a fight," Morehead snapped.

"But that's just what I did," Malone answered him. "I figured it was time that I was looking for advancement if I was ever to get anywhere in the world. So I quit, and now I'm looking for a job as foreman. You happen to have an opening?"

Morehead glared at Malone a moment, and then started pacing the floor again. He was a nervous man and he could not stand still. He ran over what little he knew of Malone. Duffy had picked him up somewhere out of the mountains, which fact indicated that he had known the smell of gunsmoke before he came to Circle M. Duffy had selected his men carefully, he had chosen men who had no scruples, and who would do what they were told so-long as the pay came in.

Malone had been a silent one. He had been down on the Border at one time, perhaps came from there originally. He was a half-breed, and beneath his stolid exterior, Morehead had thought he discerned a seething cauldron of emotions. What they were, Morehead had no way of knowing, but he had the impression that the man hated the world, and that he was like a coiled rattlesnake, always prepared to strike at any foot that stepped near him. Morehead judged him to be cold-blooded and full of guile, rather than the mere overbearing

bully which Duffy's strength and brutality made him. As between the two, it seemed now that perhaps Pancho Malone would be the more valuable man.

Morehead stopped his pacing and faced Malone. "What if Duffy doesn't like your taking his job? How would you handle a situation like that?"

Malone shrugged. "I have been handling myself for quite a few years. Don't let a little thing like that worry you."

Morehead was satisfied with this answer. Malone would take care of Duffy if Duffy wanted to make trouble about being supplanted.

"One more thing; when trouble started around here, I sent down to Wedge City for a crew. There'll be a dozen men here any time, and they'll not be easy to handle, if they're the kind of men I want. You understand? I'm expecting trouble, and I've prepared for it. What about those men?"

"One man or a dozen," Pancho Malone answered. "If I'm foreman I'll give the orders, and I'll see that they're followed."

"There may be people around here who don't approve of what I'm doing," Morehead said.

"That's not my business," Malone answered. "So far as I know, there's no law in this country, and so we do what we think best. I've been my own law for quite a while. If I work for a man, I work for him."

Morehead made another round trip to the door, then announced his decision. "All right, Malone, you're the foreman of Circle M starting now."

"Then I'm foreman," Malone answered easily. He drained his cup of coffee. "What's on your mind?" He took out the makings, and as he rolled his smoke he looked at young Freeman. "You take a walk for a while," he said. "I'll call you when we're through talking."

Young Freeman's face showed his anger. He glared at Malone a moment. Malone met his eyes and held them, saying nothing more. Freeman's look gave way; his revolt lasted only seconds. He slid the frying pan back on the stove with a clatter and turned and walked out of the bunkhouse.

Morehead sat down on a chair and watched this, and when Freeman was gone, he asked. "What's the idea? The boy was with us all along."

"He hasn't any backbone. As afraid of Duffy as he is, he couldn't even keep his mouth shut about Duffy when you questioned him. He might do to take along, if his old man is along for him to follow, but I don't want him knowing what my plans are in advance. The less he knows, the less he can repeat."

Morehead liked Malone's attitude, but he did not tell him so. "Well, here's what's on my mind. I've told Duffy, and he's fumbled everything. Now things are so we can't afford any more fumbling around. We've got this whole prairie against us before I was ready for that to happen, and so we've got to act before they get a chance to get organized."

"I was wondering what all the stalling around was for," Malone observed.

Morehead did not like this very well, but he did not mention that, either. Instead, he explained, "I want this whole prairie. There's no use beating around the bush about it. I want it, and I'm going to have it, because I'm smart enough to get it and strong enough to hold it. That's all that counts."

"I thought so," Malone agreed. "But you ought to have had it by now."

"I intended to take care of those people one at a time, so they wouldn't get panicky and gang up on me," Morehead explained. "But Duffy muffed all that, and now he's taken that woman away. That's like waving a red rag in front of a bull. They'll all be up in arms. Before they were just suspicious. They were unorganized, and didn't know what was going to happen to them next. They just waited around to see what would happen. But I know the type, they'll use that woman for an excuse, and they'll take the initiative. They might even come after me."

"That's not necessary," Malone said. "We can put a stop to that."

"What's your idea?"

"The same one you should have had; you want this land, then just go chase 'em and be done with it. That's all there is to it."

"You make it sound too simple."

"You've tried to complicate it, and where did it get you? Nowhere, except to warn them that you were going to make trouble for them. If you want 'em off, put 'em off and that's the end of it."

Morehead stood up. "That's what I wanted to hear you say, because that's what I've decided to do. We'll hit 'em as soon as those new men come."

"The sooner the better," Pancho Malone answered. "Give me a dozen real fighters and I'll sweep this range clean for you in a matter of hours."

"The men are coming," Morehead assured him. "We'll strike as soon as they get here."

"Strike where?"

"Wherever they are," Morehead answered impatiently. "Why?"

Pancho Malone shook his head. "No. That's foolish. They'll already be expecting us to do that, and they'll be ready. We will pick the place to fight, and it won't be where they want it to happen."

He stepped to the door and called Freeman in, and said, "I want you to saddle up and ride over to Weldon's."

The youth's narrow face darkened and he growled, "What, and get killed?"

"No. Ask for a job. Tell them that Duffy was drunk this morning and started shoving you around, and that you are sore at us and want to join up with them."

"They wouldn't give me a job if I was starving."

"Do as I tell you," Malone snapped. "Never mind whether they give you a job or not. You just hang around there as long as they will let you, and get your eyes full. See what Weldon is doing. See how many men he's got around him. See what his neighbors are up to. If you don't learn anything there, go on to the next place and tell the same story. Ask for a drink

of water. Ask for work. Stay for a meal. Give 'em a hand doing a little work. Find out everything you can. And then get back here tonight. Hear me?"

"Suppose they start trying to pump me?"

"Of course they'll pump you. They'll pump you dry. Act like you don't want to tell it, but when they insist, you tell them that our men are all getting fed up with Duffy, and that tomorrow Morehead is setting out for Wedge City to hire himself a crew, and that he expects to be back in with them in about six days. Get that?"

The young man whined. "But that ain't safe—"

"Safe!" Malone snapped. He turned a disgusted look at Freeman. "I thought you was a man. What do you think this is, a picnic?" His eyes narrowed and his voice dropped to a silky purr. "Now you do what I tell you, and do it quick. And after this, don't make me have to tell you anything twice. Get out, and be back by midnight."

Freeman read danger in the cold brown eyes that bored into him, and a clammy fear chilled his blood. Duffy was a bully, he was hard and tough with his men, and he could whip any of them with his fists. But this man was different; there was a cold menace in him, like the cold silence of a copperhead snake. Freeman escaped from the bunkhouse and headed for the horse corral, glad to escape those cold eyes.

Morehead had a mixed emotion of satisfaction and doubt. Malone was not going to be an easy man to handle; Duffy had left the thinking to Morehead, but Malone was a man who was going to think for himself.

"You're sending a boy to do a man's work," he said. "What's the idea?"

"I'll make a man out of him if he works for me," Malone said quietly. "And this is the idea; Weldon will get the notion from Junior that we've got men now, and will probably have them till you leave tomorrow. Then they'll figure that the time to strike is while you're not here to run things, and so they'll wait till then to hit us. But your new crew will be here by tomorrow. I'll have that crew laying a trap for Weldon to

walk into. And on the other hand, if they don't take a notion to hit us while we're weak, then we'll know that they either aren't organized, or else haven't the guts to strike out at us. And in that case, all we have to do is go over and sweep 'em up and bury them." Malone made a gesture with his hands. "That's all there is to it."

"It's simple if it works," Morehead answered. "But I tell you, Weldon is not a man that you can fool easily. He's got sense, he's smelled gunsmoke, and those little ranchers will follow him to hell if he gives the word."

"That's exactly where they'll follow him to if they stick with him," Pancho answered. "I've seen him make a fool out of Duffy, but I ain't Duffy. Weldon's hide is no more bulletproof than the next man's."

Morehead was satisfied. He saw that he had caught a wild-cat by the tail when he had given Pancho Malone Duffy's job, but the task of turning him loose could wait until he was through with the man.

He turned and went back to the house.

CHAPTER 18

COMING DOWN out of the mountains and reaching sight of his house as he rode across the prairie with Heddon and the girl, Weldon saw unusual signs of activity around his place. Even from this distance he saw that his horse corral contained a number of strange animals. There were several covered wagons around the back lot near the big hay barn, and he could see the moving figures of a number of people milling about the place. It reminded him of a camp meeting around a country church.

As they rode closer they began to recognize the wagons and horses. They belonged to nester families. There were small campfires by the various wagons where the families had been cooking their meals, and there were children playing in the yard around the house. Some of the wagons were loaded with

household goods and had wagon sheets over them, as though the families were packed to leave the country.

"What do you make of that?" Heddon asked.

"Something has stirred them up," Weldon answered. "We'll see."

They reached the barnlot and Ed Hay met them when they dismounted. The girl was the first to speak. "My father, is he all right?"

"Yes, miss. Go right in."

The girl rushed off toward the house. Hay followed Weldon and Heddon as they unsaddled and threw their horses into the corral.

"What happened to you?" Hay asked. "We was just waiting for Forrest and Hap to get back and then we was going to look for you."

Weldon told him briefly what had happened, then asked about the crowd.

"While we was in town burying Brandlies and Turley yesterday, Marshal Bradford had a talk with the doctor. I reckon he didn't want to tell us directly, on account of having to be impartial, but he told Doc that the marshal at Wedge City had sent him word that somebody there was hiring gunhands for somebody down here. The Wedge City marshal was just giving him a tip-off to look for trouble, I reckon, and didn't know what it was all about. Well, Doc told me and Forrest and Hap so we wouldn't get caught unprepared. And you not being here, we figured we'd better get ready for them. We figured it was best to kind of get organized and get everybody together so's to protect the women and children, and have the men here in a bunch so's we could defend ourselves. So we rounded up the farmers. Hap and Forrest have gone back to town in the buckboard for more ammunition. All right with you, I hope?"

"You did the right thing," Weldon answered. "Anything important happened?"

"No, except a couple of nesters' wives had a little hair-pulling over which one got to the well first."

"They're under a pretty heavy strain," Weldon answered "You can't blame them for being on edge."

Heddon said, "My family here?" Hay said, "Your wife is looking after the house," and Heddon went to find them. Hay followed him with his eyes, then looked inquiringly at Weldon.

Weldon said, "Something came over that fellow. He's turning out different from what I expected. I'd hold off judging him for a while. Anything else?"

"Yes. I was waiting for Heddon to go before I told you. Those cattle we rounded up and threw into that fenced pasture. They're gone. Every last head of them."

"So," Weldon answered. "When did you find that out?"

"It was late last evening. We hadn't got a chance to look at them before, what with the funeral and rounding up these people. Think we ought to follow them? According to the signs, they were headed back toward Morehead's."

"They've probably had a thirty-six hour start on us," Weldon answered. "And I don't think they went to Morehead's. I think they went to the mountains."

"You're not going to just forget 'em, are you?"

"No, but I think I know where they went. Morehead is somehow tied up with a hideout ranch up there. We'll have to look into it, but this other business is more important right now."

Some of the nesters were drifting down to the corral, and the talk became general, but all of it was speculative about Morehead's intentions. The group was divided in its opinions and in its ideas as to what should be done. There was no leadership among them, not any organized thinking. They were like a trail herd without a lead steer.

Weldon saw that it was going to take a strong hand to whip them into any semblance of unity, and it was unity they must have if they were to defend themselves from Morehead, who knew exactly what he wanted and how he was going to get it. He set about discussing matters in a way calculated to draw them together in the common idea that they had to fight as a

group rather than as individuals. And, being strongly individualistic men, in the habit of acting independently for themselves, they were not easily influenced.

. . .

Junior Freeman rode out of Circle M glad to be away from the baleful influence of Pancho Malone. A man knows how to get along with a bully like Duffy, he just does what he is told for fear of getting his ears knocked down. But this Malone was a different person, he was a man with hidden things in him, he had the power to scheme and to do dark things in the night. Malone was a man to fear—a man such as Junior Freeman would like to be, one whose very presence inspired terror, whose soft spoken word was a thing to be obeyed.

That was a thought, and Junior Freeman played around with it as he rode across the rolling land toward Weldon's.

Lost in his dreams, he came over the last rise and saw Weldon's spread lying before him. His eyes swept the house and barns, he saw the extra horses in the corral and the wagons pulled up in the yard. He noted moving figures here and there, and he recognized this as a gathering of a big part of the people of the valley.

He pulled his horse to a stop and viewed the scene before him with growing fear. He felt weak in the pit of his stomach; a cold sweat broke out on his face, and he put both hands on the saddle horn because there was a trembling in his arms.

He speculated on passing by Weldon's and visiting with some of the neighbors. He might learn something that way, and go back and report to Pancho that he had learned it from Weldon. And then he gave up this idea. So great was the terror that Pancho inspired in him, that he knew he would be afraid to lie to the man. He was afraid to go on to Weldon's, and he was afraid not to go.

His fear of Pancho was greater than his fear of Weldon, and so with water in the veins of his legs, he forced himself to ride on. He would make up his story on the spur of the moment and get away from Weldon's as quickly as he could.

After all, Weldon was not the type of man who would shoot him down in cold blood.

He reached Weldon's in a few minutes, and he knew that he had been watched as he came on. He pulled up to the group of men standing around the corral, and forced himself to go through with his act.

He knew Weldon by sight, and spotted him standing with Ed Hay and some other men. He was not wearing his holster and gun, but he kept his hands on his saddle horn to show Weldon that he was not getting ready to suddenly come out with a sneak gun and start shooting.

"Can I talk to you a minute?" he said to Weldon.

"Go right ahead," Weldon answered. "What's on your mind?"

Freeman's nose twitched, but he knew he could not influence Weldon. "Well, it's like this," he said. "I'm through with Morehead, and I thought maybe you could use another hand. I might be able to do you a lot of good, knowin' what I know about that outfit."

"Maybe you could," Weldon answered. "Let's hear it, and I can tell you how much good you'll be able to do us."

"Well, it ain't that simple," Freeman answered. "I'd be afraid to talk unless I knew I was tied up with you all, unless I knew you all was behind me. They'd probably get me if I didn't have me no protection."

Weldon studied this a moment, then asked, "What went wrong with you and Morehead? I thought you and your old man were kind of the backbone of Circle M."

"We was," the boy answered, "but we don't aim to be any more. It's Duffy. He's a bully, and he don't treat a man right. Me and my old man decided we'd pull out, and so I come to see if you could take me and him on."

"Your old man send you?"

"Yeah."

"When?"

"Just a while ago."

"How come you make this sudden decision?"

"Well, Duffy comes home from town drunk this morning, and got to cussing all the boys out. He knocked me down, and my old man didn't like that, so he objected. So Duffy knocked him down, too. My old man would have killed him then and there, but Duffy took his gun away from him and hit him over the head with it. No self-respecting man is going to stand for a thing like that, are they?"

"No, they wouldn't," Weldon answered gravely.

"Well, you don't blame us for quitting, do you?"

"No. Not a bit of it."

"Then you'll give me a job?"

"Well now," Weldon answered thoughtfully. "It's like this. As far as men are concerned, we've got about enough of them. But if you knew anything, maybe we ought to take you on, in case you thought that by working for us, you should tell us everything we ought to know."

"That's what I thought," the youth said. "What are you all intending to do?"

Seeing how Weldon was swallowing his story, Freeman lost some of his fear, and in its place, as he built his story, much of his self-confidence returned to him, and this made his lying easy for him. He was beginning to enjoy seeing how Weldon was falling into his trap.

Weldon studied a moment, then said, "I don't know exactly what we should do. We don't know what Morehead has got up his sleeve, so we don't know how to defend ourselves from him. Have you got any ideas? You ought to know what they're up to."

Freeman took this as acceptance, and he basked in the good feeling of having his opinion asked by Weldon. He slid off his horse, thoughtfully rolled a cigarette and lighted it, keeping Weldon in suspense until he got it drawing good.

"Why, yes," he answered, and he could not hide the sense of importance he felt. "I can be plenty of help. I know their plans right down to the last move, and I can tell you what you've got to do to beat 'em."

"Then you'd be mighty valuable to us," Weldon answered. "What's your idea?"

"It's like this," Freeman answered, squatting on his boot heel. "Morehead is having trouble with them mountain men. It's Duffy's fault because he's trying to bully them. They ain't the kind to take it, and so they're going to walk out on him. I found that out, secret. They're going to stick around till day after tomorrow when Morehead pays them off, then they're taking out for the mountains and leaving him without a crew. But I told Morehead this, so he's going to pay them off, then hit for Wedge City and get him a crew of real gunnies. He can make that trip and be back with the men by about a week from now."

Weldon studied this, then observed, "That way, in three nights from now, Morehead will be gone and there won't be any crew around his place from then until he gets back with his gunnies. Is that it?"

"That's it exactly," Freeman beamed. "You see; if you don't hit him, he's going to hit you the minute he gets back with his men. You can't hit him now with those mountain boys still there. But three nights from now, you could go over there and burn Morehead's place to the ground, and you could be all set to surprise him and take care of him when he gets back with his new crew. So, if you just timed yourself to hit him three nights from now—not before and not after—you'd finish him for keeps."

"I believe you've got something there," Weldon admitted. "I believe you've told me something."

"Then I stick around?" Freeman asked eagerly.

"Yes," Weldon answered, getting to his feet. "Yes, you stick around."

He turned to Hay and said, "Ed, see that Freeman gets something to eat, and then make him comfortable in the grain bin. He'll be around for a while."

Ed Hay rubbed his chin and said gravely, "I'll be glad to do it. I wouldn't want him to get dissatisfied with our hospitality and take a notion to leave us."

"That's the idea."

When Hay had left for the kitchen with Freeman, Heddon, who had returned from the house, let out a deep breath and said, "Well, so Duffy's leading a double life, is he? He's lying dead twelve miles up in the mountains just after sun-up, and at the same time he comes home from town drunk, and beats up his crew. For a corpse, he sure gets around, don't he?"

"And so does that fellow Josh. Maybe we should have buried 'em and put rocks on their graves to make 'em stay put."

There were a dozen or more of the nesters and smaller ranchers around the corral gate who had heard the interchange between Weldon and Freeman. They had already heard the story of Duffy's killing, and seeing how Weldon had been leading Freeman on, they had kept silent, all of them realizing that Weldon was pumping Freeman. Now there was a stir among them, and a flow of comments, and they looked to Weldon for his explanation.

Weldon had been trying to convince them that the time had come for them to give up their defensive tactics and to organize themselves and go after Morehead once for all. He had not been able to arouse too much enthusiasm for his idea, for many of them had the forlorn hope that something would come up to stop the trouble. That idea, as Weldon pointed out, was only wishful thinking. As long as Morehead was alive and wanted their land, he would try to get it at whatever cost.

Now he had a new argument, and he used it on them. "You've just heard that young man come here with that wild tale of his. Morehead doesn't yet know that Duffy is dead, so he sent that fellow over here to spy on us and to plant an idea in our heads. The way he tells it, we're supposed to get the idea that it would be dangerous for us to hit him now because he's got his mountain men with him. That makes me think that his mountain men have *already* left him. He's sent word that in a few days from now he'll be without a crew, but will have another one a few days later.

"What does that mean? That's an invitation for us to at-

tack him when we think he's weakest, that is, three days from now. He's depending on us to use that time to get ready. That means he doesn't want us to make a move until then, and by that time he'll have a hole dug for us to bury ourselves in. He's weak now, but he'll be strong enough to destroy us as soon as those new gun hands get here that Marshal Bradford said were coming. When they get here, you can be sure that Morehead will finish his job on us. There it is; he has already burned out one family and killed a couple of ranchers. Do you want to wait till he gets strong enough to kill some more of us, or do you want to defend yourselves and your families now while we've got a chance to come out alive?"

There was a buzz of talk in the crowd as the men faced the fact that they could not avoid a showdown by waiting to be attacked. Weldon drove his point home.

"For my own part, I'm not waiting. Tonight is the time to hit Morehead, and to hit him as hard as he plans to hit us. There's not room for him and honest ranchers here on the same range. Those of you who want to help will be welcome. We're riding tonight."

Weldon went into the kitchen just as young Freeman got through eating the food that Heddon's daughter had served him. The young man got up from the table and said, "Well, I'll get on back and tell my old man that we're lined up with you."

"I wouldn't do that, I believe," Weldon said. "Stick around."

"No, I better ride. He'll be wanting to know how I made out."

"It won't hurt him to wait. Fact of the matter is, it wouldn't do you any good to go looking for him. He couldn't very well come with you."

"Why not?" The youth bridled. "He'll come when he knows it's all set."

Weldon glanced at the women working around the kitchen. "Just step outside a minute, and I'll tell you," he said. He nodded to Ed Hay to come along.

Outside the kitchen door, Weldon said, "The reason your

father won't be joining you is that I killed him yesterday. Up in the mountains where Duffy sent him."

The youth's eyes bugged a moment as he slowly realized that he had been caught in a lie. His face went a little grey, but he tried to bluff his way out of the trap he had dug for himself.

"You got something wrong," he said. "My old man didn't go up into the mountains for Duffy."

Weldon stepped to the door. "Mrs. Heddon, will you ask June Lockridge to step here a moment?"

The girl came at Mrs. Heddon's call, and Weldon asked her, "Is this man one of the bunch that burned your house and took you up to the mountains?"

The girl looked at Freeman and nodded. "That's all," Weldon said, and she went back through the kitchen.

"Miss Lockridge couldn't have been back here unless somebody went up and took her from your father, and they couldn't have taken her away from him without killing him. Do you know what those farmers and ranchers will do when Miss Lockridge identifies you as one of that bunch?"

Freeman gulped. His legs were weak and there was a big hollow place in the pit of his stomach. The fear in him made him tongue-tied, and he could not speak.

"They'll hang you to that sycamore tree," Weldon went on. "Do you know how a new rope scratches your neck while it is choking you to death?"

"It wasn't me, it was Duffy," Freeman stammered. "I didn't lay a hand on the girl. I didn't do a thing but hold the horses."

"Duffy is dead. He was lying up in the mountains dead at the time you said he was at Morehead's beating you up. You were sent over here to tell that yarn, and all you're going to get for it is a hanging."

"It was Duffy—"

"When one man's guilty, they're all guilty. Duffy's dead and your father is dead, so you're the only one left to hang."

Weldon caught Freeman by the shirt collar and slapped his face a resounding whack. He slapped him three or four

times until the man's head was bounding back and forth from shoulder to shoulder.

"Now start talking," Weldon snapped. "What's the idea in Morehead sending you over here? Talk fast if you don't want me to call those farmers up here and turn them loose on you."

The thought of what the girl had gone through as a result of Morehead's greed made him cruel for the time, and he had no sympathy for the thoroughly scared young man. "Talk, damn you!" he barked.

Desperately eager to save his own skin, terrified at the thought of the rope and the sycamore tree, Freeman whimpered out his story. He answered the questions that Weldon threw at him. In his terror he spilled his guts; he told everything.

He verified all of Weldon's suspicions.

Weldon spat disgustedly when he had finished, and said to Hay, "Take him away, Ed, and lock him in the feed bin. Nail the door shut, and I want a man sitting in front of it with a rifle every minute of the time until we're through with this business."

Weldon found Heddon by the side of the house and told him to get some sleep. Then he sent a volunteer to go out across the prairie to a point where he could watch Morehead's house. The man was to report if he saw anybody ride away from, or any mass of men riding into the place. Then Weldon lay down in the barn to get some much needed rest. His body was still weak; the muscles of his leg and left arm were stiffening, and he was groggy from lack of rest.

Hap and Duke Forrest rode in some time in the middle of of the afternoon, bringing a case of pistol shells and a case of rifle shells. Ed Hay brought them up to date on things.

Hap perked up. "So we're going to hit first for a change?" he beamed. "It's about time! When does the big show come off?"

"Tonight. We couldn't get within half a mile of Morehead's in the daytime without him seeing us."

"How many of us is going?"

Ed Hay looked oddly at Durham and Forrest. "These farmers can't make up their minds whether they want to wait and let Morehead butcher them, or go after him first. Weldon left it up to them to come along if they wanted to. I'm going to find out who's going. Give me these fencing pliers off your saddle, and tell all the men to come here."

In the shade of the big barn, Ed Hay pried the lids off the two wooden ammunition cases and dumped the small individual paper-boxes out on the ground while the farmers and small ranchers drifted up and waited to see what he wanted.

"Gents," Hay told them soberly. "Weldon and a few of us who take our responsibilities seriously are going out tonight to stop a man who is trying to destroy everybody around here. It's a duty everybody owes to himself and to his family and to his neighbor.

"There ain't any law says anybody has to do his duty. Nobody has to go along. But for those that want to go, we've got plenty of ammunition. Everybody that's going, step right up and take what ammunition he thinks he'll need. The rest of you just step over to the other side, if you don't mind."

A couple of men stepped up and asked for pistol shells, another wanted some of each, and then another and another until there were only two men left, an old man with red whiskers and a lean young man in worn overalls who had one eye missing.

The old man rubbed his whiskers thoughtfully, turned to the young one and said, "Hell, I can't expect my neighbors to do my fighting for me. A man couldn't hold his head up if he didn't go. Come on, son."

The last two stepped up and asked for ammunition.

Weldon had got a little rest and came out to supper at about sundown. Heddon came and found him and wanted to speak with him.

"There's something I wanted to ask you before we got started," he said. "I've been having a talk with my family, and after this is over, I intend to put in a crop of late corn and some headfeed. There's time for that. What I wanted to

say was, that the crop won't take up all my time, and if you heard of anybody that wanted any day-work done, I'd be mighty proud of a chance to get some work, me and the boy, both."

Weldon saw a kind of quiet determination in the man, he saw a new Hédidon.

"Why, I'm pretty sure there'll be plenty of work around this summer. There's haying to be done, and then fall round-up, and there's got to be somebody to look after Brandlies' and Turley's stuff while their affairs are settled. How are you fixed for horses?"

"I've got that one horse. I'll use him for riding and ploughing, both."

"You can't work this land very fast with a one-horse plough. I'll speak to Forrest about a team for you. Maybe you can work out the price of it."

"Thanks," Heddon answered. "And there's one more thing that I ought to mention. I want to get started right around here, if I get started at all. I'm the one that killed that stock on Morehead's place. And I set fire to his barn. I know I didn't have a right to do that, but if I hadn't done something to bring things to a head, Morehead would have done a lot more damage than he did. I just wanted you to know. In case anything happens to me, I want to get started right here or not at all."

Weldon felt a genuine relief at Heddon's confession. He had never settled the question in his own mind, but now that Heddon was trying to wipe his own slate clean, there was only one thing Weldon could do about it.

He took Heddon's two spent cartridges out of his pocket and handed them to the man. "I found one of them by those dead cattle, and the other one came from your gun when you shot at that Morehead man down at the corral," he said. "Take them and throw them away, and forget the whole business. Don't mention it to anybody else. I don't know who around here is wise enough to judge the right and wrong of that business. Two men are dead as the result of it. But who knows

how many more might be dead if you hadn't done that? I don't know. Nobody could answer that one."

Heddon squared his shoulders. "I just wanted to say that I'll take responsibility for my own acts."

Weldon put a hand on Heddon's shoulder. "That's all anybody can expect from a man," he said. "You're doing all right, Heddon."

Heddon went back to join his wife, and Weldon started toward the corral where the men were gradually congregating from their various campfires. He had taken only a few steps when June Lockridge came up to him through the dark and laid a hand on his arm.

He stopped and looked at her. It was so dark that he could not make out the expression on her face, but there was emotion in her voice.

"Jim," she said. "Be careful!"

"Why, thanks," he answered. "Sure I will. There's nothing to be worried about."

"There's always something to be worried about in a case like this. You're not in shape to go through much more."

"I'll get plenty of rest tomorrow," he answered lightly. "But thanks for taking an interest."

She had not removed her hand from his arm, and she stood thus during a long moment of silence. He felt the tension in her fingers and knew that she was under some great pressure. He stroked her hair and said, "Don't worry, June. It's nothing."

Suddenly she broke. It was a little cry. "Oh, Jim," and she threw herself into his arms.

His arm was around her and he held her closely. Then he knew a great hunger for her, and it was a new thing for him. He lifted her chin until her face was turned up to his. Then she gave him her lips for a long moment, and he tasted a happiness that he had not known was possible. Finally she pulled her lips away from him and she was gently crying on his shoulder.

He tried to quiet her, and she tried to pull herself together. "I shouldn't be such a weakling," she said.

"Nobody likes this business," he answered.

"It's not a good thing to meet someone, and then have him ride away like this," she answered. "But I suppose I'm just thinking about myself, and I should be ashamed."

"Everybody thinks of himself."

"You don't. You're making this fight more for your neighbors than for yourself. I know it."

"A man's neighbors and his friends are about his only reason for living, aren't they?"

"If they're all he has; but if he has somebody of his own . . ." Her voice trailed off as she checked the words of a thought which she believed was another expression of selfishness.

He tried to laugh her out of her fears. "We'll all be back in a few hours and then it will all be over," he assured her.

She started to deny this, caught herself, and stepped out of his arms. She did not believe that they would all come back, but she would not show him her doubts. "All right," she said. "And good luck." Then she turned and walked swiftly back toward the house.

Weldon went on toward the corral where the men were now saddling up. Several of them, already saddled, and with rifle boots on their saddles as well as their pistols and cartridge belts, were waiting around the corral gate.

It was Duke Forrest who asked the question on all their minds. "Just how far are we going with this business, Jim?"

Weldon looked over the crowd and he was surprised at the intensity with which they seemed to wait for their answer. The farmers and, for that matter, most of these small ranchers were new at this kind of business, and none of them felt comfortable about it. He had to put a hardness into his voice which he did not feel, for this was as distasteful to him as it was to the rest of them.

"Here's your answer; the man is getting ready to either kill you or drive you out of here. There's just not room on the Pushmoline for him and the rest of us. Personally, I don't like

the idea of being either killed or driven out of the country by anybody. It's either him or me, so he has to go."

"He won't go," Hap Durham said, "at least while he's on his two feet."

"I know it," Weldon said. "And there's your answer. What other answer could there be?"

CHAPTER 19

DARKNESS WAS UPON THEM, and Weldon sent Ed Hay around to tell all the campers to put their campfires out. They could be seen from too great a distance. He went back to the group at the corral, and they were all saddled and waiting. He and Ed Hay counted off twenty of them who were armed and would ride. He named two of them to stay back and guard the ranch. Mack Rennison's leg wound would not let him ride, but he was hobbling around with the aid of a stick.

"You take charge here, Mack," Weldon told him. "And see that the man in the feed bin doesn't get away. We'll be back when this is over once for all."

He turned back to the assembled riders. "We'll break up into two parties," he said. "Forrest will handle one and Ed Hay the other. I'll give my orders direct to them, and you take your orders from the leader of your own party. All right, let's get going."

He stood by his horse while the eighteen men mounted and divided off into two groups, and then he mounted. These men were grimly silent as they made two single files that stretched out across the prairie. They were not gunfighters, but farmers and ranchers who had homes and families to protect, and this job was not to their liking.

Weldon thought of these things as he threw himself into his saddle and rode up along the line of them. They had come to this country looking for homes and for the peaceful pursuit of their way of life. They had found that they were going to have to fight for the things they had dreamed of, and he did not know how they would stand up under gunfire.

They had got to within three quarters of a mile of Morehead's house when the form of a man on a galloping horse emerged from the dark ahead of them. The man pulled up short and called out, identifying himself. He was the volunteer who had ridden out to watch Morehead's place.

Weldon said, "Come on," and the man rode up and joined them. "What's up?"

"A bunch of horsemen just rode up to Morehead's house from the direction of Big Shady. I wasn't close enough to see who they were in the dark, but I followed as close as I dared. They left their horses saddled in the back yard, and they all went into the bunkhouse. I didn't wait for any more, but pulled out."

A buzz of excitement went through the group of riders. Forrest said, "You were right, Jim. He wanted us to hold off till he got those men in and got his trap set."

Weldon answered, "It's too bad they showed up so soon, but we're started now, and we're not turning back. Anybody who wants to go back can go now."

One man grumbled in the dark, "We came to do a job. Let's get it done. What do we do now?"

Weldon said, "The longer they're here, the more time they have to get organized. We'd better hit them before they get set."

"There'll be fighting," somebody said, and a man answered him, "What do you think we came for? To pitch horseshoes?" A ripple of nervous laughter went through the crowd. The men were on edge.

"Ed, take your men and circle in from the right. We'll come in from the left. Take it at a slow canter so I'll have time to get there before anything starts. Leave your horses with one of your men several hundred yards away from the house, and go in afoot. We won't make the mistake they did the other night."

The horsemen broke into two columns which separated slightly as they went on toward the pinpoint of lights that marked the Morehead bunkhouse. Weldon led his men on to

a small pasture fence which they cut. Here they dismounted, and tied up.

"Hap," Weldon said, "you tend the horses."

"You go to hell, Jim," Hap Durham answered soberly. "Get some married man. I been waiting too long for this shindig to sit back and hold horses when it starts."

"All right," Weldon answered, and got one of the farmers to hold the animals.

Afoot they approached the lighted bunkhouse and fanned out. "These walls are just pine boards, and a bullet will go right through them," Weldon said. "Make about a half circle around the house, till you run into Ed's boys."

They spread out around the bunkhouse, having got to within fifty yards of it without attracting attention. There were voices coming from within the walls, but Weldon could not make out any of the conversation. He was not particularly interested in it, anyway.

He waited the few minutes he knew it would take for his men to make the circle and connect up with Hay's men. Then, crouching in the darkness with his Winchester in his hands, and his two pistols still holstered, he lifted his rifle and aimed it at one of the windows and pulled the trigger.

The explosion of his weapon rocked the still night, and there was a moment's silence. Then the air jumped with the combined roars of every rifle around the building. Glass crashed inward as every window in the place was broken.

A chorus of loud yells came out of the bunkhouse, and somebody inside frantically threw a couple of shots out through a window.

Weldon got to his feet and yelled, "Come on, men. Close in on 'em!"

He had put himself in a position outside the front door of the bunkhouse, and now he raised his voice. "Come out of there, Morehead. Bring your men out with your hands in the air. We've got you surrounded!"

The answer came—a loud volley of pistol shots from inside

the building. They were wild shooting, wasted lead, but the men inside had no visible targets to shoot at.

The answer was all that Weldon had expected, and it was enough. He shouted to his own men. "All right, they've had their chance. Pour it to 'em."

The yell drew his men closer to the house; it brought a wave of rifle fire that smoked up the whole area, and the flashes of gun blaze were like giant fireflies on a summer night.

The lights of the bunkhouse blinked out as the men inside collected their wits about them. And then after a moment's silence from within, the front door of the place flew open with a rending crash. The men were making a run to get out of their trap.

He poured a withering fire of lead into the doorway and he got a hail of lead in answer. One man screeched out a death cry. Weldon slid back to a safer zone as more men poured out of the bunkhouse and answered the firing. More of his own men came sweeping around the sides of the house, their presence and movements marked by the muzzle fire of their weapons.

The fight surged gradually toward the front of the house, and the individual barks of the guns gradually became blended into one continuous roar. The smoke of battle hung low in the night air and blacked out even the vague shapes which the stars had given to the moving shadows of men.

Stray lead whined around like a swarm of mad hornets. The yells of both sides were mingled into a continuous babel of voices, of name-calling and orders, and of the screams of men who had felt the hot bite of bullets. The gunmen's horses snorted and pawed and fought their tie ropes, and the ground became an inferno of confusion, of sound and of the choking smell of burned powder.

Morehead's killers were fighting their way around the darkened corner of the bunkhouse and with one accord making their way through flying lead toward their horses.

Hap Durham yelled, "We got 'em running! Mow 'em down!"

From somewhere in the darkness, Duke Forrest shouted, "More noise with your gun, and less with your mouth, Hap!"

The sound of thumping boots and the trail of muzzle light from their guns showed Weldon that the group of killers was surging along the side of the bunkhouse, shooting their way toward their horses. They had steadied down now, and were not shooting so wildly, but were returning fire toward every flashing weapon that surrounded them. They had quit their yelling and were more serious in their lead throwing.

They reached the rear corner of the bunkhouse in a dead run, and Weldon saw their vague shapes through the gun-smoke. They cursed their stamping horses as they fought to get their tie ropes loose from the hitchrail.

Morehead's gunnies were grouped at a known spot now, and had to stay there until they could get their horses untied and moving. All of Weldon's men realized this at the same moment, and made the most of it, redoubling their fire, closing in afoot, firing, running forward, dropping and firing again. The rolling thunder of guns was terrific; the trapped men cursed; horses caught in the crossfire screamed and fell and threshed in the madness of panic on the ground, kicking and pawing, injuring other horses and men in the mad scramble.

And then as the ranchers closed in, the hired killers began to break away on horseback, their shapes looming up momentarily as they tried desperately to break through the circle of fire, shooting their way out to freedom. Some of them made it; some of the horses fell and their riders made off afoot in the darkness.

A horseman bolted past Weldon, almost bowling him over. He threw a quick shot at the fleeing killer and heard him grunt as the bullet struck him. Horse and rider faded into the darkness and were gone.

And then suddenly as it had started the shooting stopped, and a silence came upon the place so profound that to Weldon's tortured ears the air seemed to rock with it.

"That's all," Weldon shouted. "Close in, but watch yourselves."

There was a general movement of the ranchers through the back yard, and they were converging on the bunkhouse. Hap Durham came running up with a bead of hay. "This is my job," he announced, and went into the bunkhouse through the door.

In a moment there was a small red glow showing through the front window. The glow spread and Hap came back out. "That'll make a pretty blaze," he announced. "I'd like to see it from a mile away."

Others had gone to the hay bale and were bringing more blocks of it, heading toward the house. Weldon stopped them. "Just a minute," he said. "It's a serious thing to burn down a man's house. It's a thing that will stay with you for a long time. You don't want a thing like that on your minds when you try to sleep at nights."

"Then what do we do?" somebody asked. "Leave his house here, and he would still go and buy the land around it, and we'd be back where we were before."

"I know it," Weldon answered. "But I gave the order to wipe him out. It was my responsibility, and I won't ask a man to do a thing I wouldn't do myself. Give me that hay."

He took three blocks of hay from the men and went into Morehead's house through the kitchen door. He dropped a block against the wall of the kitchen and put a lighted match to it. He took another block into the big living room which Morehead's father had furnished with furniture that was the height of elegance in its day. He scattered the hay along the walls under the velvet window drapes and ignited them, standing by to watch until they were burning past all chance of being extinguished.

By the red light of the growing blaze he took one last look at the room which had been the pride of the Pushmoline a generation ago. "Decayed," he said half aloud. "A house and a family that stood still too long and just rotted away."

He turned and went out of the house and joined the men who were watching the blaze eat through the bunkhouse walls and roof. There was a red glow covering the ground

now, and they began checking their numbers, calling out names, scurrying around the dark fringe of the firelight looking for those who were missing.

They brought in the body of the old man with red whiskers. Two men came in bringing Heddon between them, but Heddon was still alive.

"Right through the fleshy part of the shoulder," Heddon said. There was no whine in his voice now. On the contrary, Weldon thought he detected a certain touch of pride. It was as though Heddon felt that by this night's work he had somehow repaid a debt he owed to his neighbors and had earned his right to sit among them.

Weldon squatted down beside where they laid him and rolled him a cigarette and handed it to him. He gave him a light slap on the knee. "You're all right, Heddon," he said.

Heddon's response was silence. But it showed in the way he relished his cigarette.

Flames were licking out of two of the windows of the big house now, and the bunkhouse was a giant red torch, throwing its sparks and burning embers a hundred feet upward into the night, the flames crackling noisily.

"That'll purify things on this range for a while," Hap said. "We've found six of them killers dead, and two more wounded. Reckon we ought to bury them all, or leave the live ones out of ground to stink up the range?"

"Bloodthirsty rascal, isn't he?" Forrest answered.

Hap's voice changed. He said excitedly, "Hey, what's the matter with my leg?" And at that moment one of his knees buckled and he slumped to the ground. He sat up and began exploring his leg. "Be damned if there ain't a bullet plumb through the calf and I didn't even know it."

Weldon was walking restlessly around among the dead and the wounded when Forrest caught up with him. "What next, Jim?" Forrest asked.

"You take over, will you?" Weldon asked. "I'm not through yet."

"What else is there to do?"

"We haven't found Morehead. He must have got away with the rest of them."

"He won't run far," Forrest said. "I don't believe the man can take a whipping. He'll be around, and you can find him later. We've had a pretty fair night of it."

"No," Weldon answered. "I've got to find him. He may have headed toward Wildcat. I'll have to go there and see." He turned and started walking toward the tied horses outside the immediate ring of firelight.

There was a small saddle shed standing near the corral gate where their horses were tied, and Weldon was within fifty feet of it when a voice said, "Weldon!"

Weldon's eyes went alertly, cutting the semi-darkness, seeing nothing. Again the voice said, "Weldon!"

Weldon's glance centered around the saddle shed, and then he saw the vague figure of Dallas Morehead.

Morehead leaned against the shed, and Weldon knew that he had been waiting there for his chance. The pride and arrogance deep within the man would not permit him to run, but made him patiently wait his chance to destroy the man who had destroyed him. Morehead could have shot Weldon before Weldon knew of his presence, but the twisted things in the man would not permit him to do that. He had to call to Weldon, and let Weldon see who was killing him.

And so as Weldon located him and recognized him, Morehead lifted his gun and fired two quick shots at him. The double roar of those shots rang in Weldon's ears as he felt the impact of one of the bullets knock him to the ground. He landed on his belly, and the fall jolted the wind out of him for a moment.

He looked up and saw Morehead coming toward him, almost running. There was excitement in his motions, a clear outward manifestation of his hatred of Weldon.

Weldon, lying on his belly, lifted his gun and took deliberate aim, and drove a bullet squarely through Morehead's chest. The muzzle of his gun kicked upward a moment, a

wisp of smoke coiling out of it while Weldon watched Morehead's movements.

Morehead fell while his feet were still taking mincing steps, and his body landed within ten feet of Weldon. He threshed a moment in convulsive movements. He rolled over and got up as far as his hands and knees, then fell flat on his face and lay still.

There were men running up now from the circle of the firelight. Weldon heard their voices, and the world became a nightmare of red flames and meaningless sounds, and then he lost consciousness.

. . . .

The next time he knew anything, he was lying in his own bed at the ranch, and June Lockridge was sitting on a chair beside him with a bowl of hot soup in her hands. The doctor was across the room replacing things in his instrument bag.

Weldon tried to turn over on his side, and then he found that his left arm and his whole chest were encased in tight bandages. He weakly relaxed on his back and looked at the girl. "It looks like I'm pretty well hobbled. What's been going on? I must have passed out for a minute or so."

"It is ten o'clock in the morning, and you have been passed out since before daylight," the girl answered. "The doctor has just taken a bullet out of your chest, but he says that you're too tough for a little thing like that to keep you down for long."

"Where is everybody?" he asked. "It's mighty quiet around here."

"Most of the farmers have left with their families," she answered. "They've gone back to their homes, but they all wanted you to know that they were going to have a big dance for you as soon as you're well enough. The ranchers have all gone up to the mountains to bring back those cattle that the mountaineers drove off. Mr. Heddon is leading them up there. My dad is still here. He's still too weak to be moved, but we'll go as soon as he can travel."

Weldon took her hand. "Don't go," he said. "I'd just have

to go and bring you back again. I was thinking maybe that instead of a dance, we could have a wedding. Or aren't you fond of weddings?"

"Weddings are one of the things I am fondest of," she smiled at him. "Now take your soup, or I'll have to kiss you, whiskers and all."

"Woman, put that soup bowl down," he ordered.

She did.

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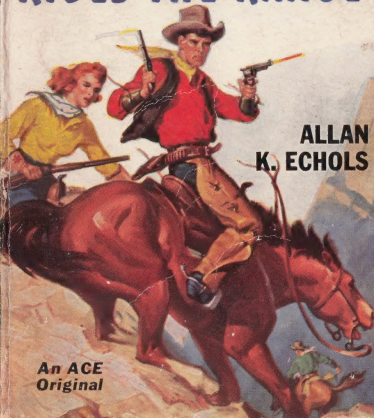
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